Sir Bascone of Sydney

Authored by: Baylen James Shaxson

Author’s note: Highschool was one hell of a journey. We either grow from it, remain horrified, or wish the clock could tick back. In the end, in Australia at least, it’s 6 years. And that’s all we get and never again. Today’s tale reflects the lives of Raymond, Haffel, Bascone and Valerin. When a tree has been pruned, what is made of it? Destroyed and lost, the old parts discard below. Yet what comes of it, is change. Old books of knowledge are never forgotten. Only that, that is so minor will ever be erased from our memories. And like Highschool, the life left behind remains with us forever, for it isn’t one small step. But a massive leap for our humanity!

Prologue:

Year: 1412

Orleans, set ablaze

Such rolling hills, that of the Lancastrian era had been all he had ever know. Thus, he lived day in, day out, near the city of Orleans. Bascone in one pocket, had dangling from his fine steed a precious scroll. One he might not know how to read. Observing all around his galloping troop, he scouted for the men who he had stolen from. Thankfully, none were in sight. Taking his swift hand, knight Sir Bascone wiped away a spear of sweat, protruding off his forehead.

"Glad to see the buggers are gone." Bascone thought.

Upon the open road, a heavily slanted hill posed his horse a challenge. As the hooves intercepted the lining of the path, numerous stones played melodies by crumbling to the ground all around him. Keeping his bottom strapped firm, Bascone wavered heavily. Tilting his footing and strapping his metal cladded feet sturdy within the confines of his saddle's straps.

"Steady there! Hold on for a bit longer! We are almost over the hilltop!" Bascone uttered his encouragement towards his horse.

However, the end of the rainbow had been steeper than he could possibly had imagined. Too bad for him, cause instead of leading him to the lands of the leprechauns. By which I mean the potato and lucky charm munching Irish. The slope whipped the front end of his horse. Tumbling its feet in a scattered projection. A wild hiss

from the horse's bitten tongue rattled violently. No amount of horse beating would tame such volume of danger.

"Calm down! You stupid horse!"

In one fell swoop a bitter scream eroded from the steed's talons, causing Bascone to lose balance.

Ahh!

Moments had passed and Bascone, along with his straddled scroll flew to the ground.

"Damn, poorly trained donkey!" He yelped while being sent to the floor.

When the fiction from the ground came knocking. All he could ever expect was becoming shit faced from the gravel penetrating through his helmet. However, something or someone had, other plans for him. As sudden as an earthquake, a time warping particle opened in front him. Sucking him in and leaving his stupid horse stranded.

Ahh!

Several echoes of screams befell him, as countless inventions of mankind's destiny appeared in front of him. Colours and distorted particles, something out of a wormhole presented themselves clearly to him. Towards

him, a clock of unknown origin came flying to him. But it wasn't there to greet him.

Smack!

Striding against the width of his face, the poor knight continued to fly through space. Then, a sudden force pressed against his jugular. Coughing and wheezing, the force soon stopped. As his vocal cords received the English update.

Overlooking a panel, a bunch of nerd scientists waited for the arrival of their Bascone. There, numerous top scientists were kept on the job for a world first, groundbreaking assignment. Within the room, a top panel plated in glass overlooked two transmitters. Each protruding what can only be described as metallic rods. Said rods excreted stable energy beams at each other. Cracking two knuckles, a head scientist overseeing the operation waited for the arrival him. Their projector then read.

"Task successful, target brought into facility."

For moments, they were excited. As if they had just struck gold. But as the chamber was observed. Nothing. The rods slowed down its operation. Replenishing the energy equivalent of the entire city's power grid. The disappointment on everyone's face was immeasurable.

But among those who were diminished. He stood apart. Once a black, shadowed figure, he slowly stalked the process. Casting rays of fear within the staff's psyche. But to him, they had failed. Approaching one of his scientists, he proclaimed.

"Why did it fail?"

With stuttering in his words, the scientist readjusted his glasses.

"It appears that the operation went as planned. According to the technology…"

"Then why did it fail!?" Nercea snapped back. "I gave you guys all the funding in the world that I could muster yet you all have failed the great Nercea Lionheart!"

On the brink of choking on his own fear, the researcher pressed away from Nercea. But no amount of backing away could ever lower his immense presence. Lowering his stance, Nercea flocked to the back of the room. There, he crumbled into a chair. Folding inwards his stance, Nercea kept to himself like the Papal archive. Among the scattered groups of researchers, they hypothesised like how all great thinkers do.

"We watched everything. The internals. The terminal." One man whispered. "How could this have failed?"

“Well, it could be that he did make it. Perhaps just not in the right spot.” Another echoed.

“How will we tell that to him?”

One of the researchers, braver than the rest bit the bullet and placed on his knightly vest. Slowly approaching the defeated lion, he struck up a conversation.

“What if, it did work. But he’s somewhere else in the world?”

Nercea slowly turned, glaring down the man who had dared to enter his chamber.

“You reckon?” He replied swiftly.

“None of our evidence says otherwise.”

“Perhaps you are correct.” He bit back. “Still, I shouldn’t hire scientists who don’t do their damn homework right.”

“Well, ah sorry… but Star trek is more important.”

Flicking away his presence, Nercea left them battered and confused as to their fates.

“So, he is within our grasps perhaps? May he be found, or else…”

Out cold on the floor, Bascone awoke as tiles of something fixed his vision. Very soon, he huddled into

some corner like a Frenchmen invading Russia. Around him, were boxes of something he couldn't interpret. To his left, a freezer stack of numerous goods came to his vision.

"What… is this place?" Bascone shivered. "I… I can't… stay warm…"

Frozen over like a coconut husk. Bascone wintered among the cloak he had worn. Chittering his teeth, his iris kept rotating across the room. Above him, an aircon spat icicles that sliced against his skin. The snow coated his skin and burned it a bright pink.

"Someone!" Bascone shouted. "Hello! Anyone!"

Not expecting to die here, in the cold. Bascone slanted his back towards the wall. Keeping his knees glued to his tongue.

Errr…

Then, he heard a waling cry of rubber plaster across the room. A door swung open as a teenage boy wearing a Maccas uniform entered. The black hat had been dipped in oil and fryers. And in a heavy rush, his quick panting soon turned towards the knight. To say he shat himself was an understatement. His footing shattered, slapping his back to the floor as he fell over.

"Ah shit!" The teen flinched. "Why the fuck are you!?"

For some reason, he could, understand the boy. Bascone stood up, awakening like the spirits of the dead. He felt a warm, calming breeze from the door. So of course, he rushed the door.

“Hey get back!” The teenager cried.

With his sword in one hand, and a determination to warm himself in the other. Bascone entered the back kitchen shouting.

“Why the fuck does it smell so good!?”

The other cooks were terrified. And shrieked as he ran past them. Taking his blade, Bascone slashed the top compartment of a fryer. Causing the beam to break and sending anything on it below. There, a massive hashbrown holster collided with the oil. Sending a splash of scolding oil onto him.

Ahh!

Scared out of his mind, Bascone smashed numerous windows on his way out. Upon leaving, what reappeared was a very confused manager on lunch break. Having a belly of a tribal man and a black, short sleeved shirt. Upon reaching the door of the diner his voice rippled against the walls.

“What the fuck happened!?” He shouted at the weakling employees.

“Someone… dressed as a knight came through here and…”

“Oh, really Raymond? You think I’ll take that excuse? You’re fired kid!”

The frightened boy quickly entered the staff room. Evacuating his bag and phone before making a walk of shame towards the exit. In his mind sat utter defeat, and worry soon frowned in regard to what he’d tell his mother.

Thanks to the bus station, the overcast rain was beaten back by the frail roof lining that had presented itself. Down below, Raymond scuttered across his screen. Watching all forms of short length videos. While distracted watching a video of some guy getting dacked. His ears picked up approaching footsteps and the cladding of metallic boots. Raymond’s head rotated to see in front of him, was the knight he had met in the freezer.

“What the hell man!?” Raymond shouted. “I open the freezer and…”

“Sorry for that… I know that’s not a good introduction.” Bascone echoed. “You saved me though.”

“Who are you anyways?” Raymond asked. “People don’t just spawn into Maccas freezers.

“The name if Sir Bascone of Orleans, from of course the city of Orleans. But them damn imbecile English have occupied my city….”

“What are you, a larper or what?” Raymond’s confused eyebrow raised. “What are you meant to be? A knight from the hundred years war?”

Bascone’s gob opened wide as his pupils shrunk.

“Did you say… a hundred years?”

Bascone could feel the vibrations of something fast veering. Taking a look around the corner, a sedan motioned its engine. Scaring the poor Bascone. Afraid it was a beast; Bascone ran over to a nearby fence lining someone’s hedge. Slanting over it before retreating away.

“Get away from me dragon!” Bascone cried.

Raymond sighed as he opened the door. There, his mother Jodie was present to scold him. As usual, for something this big.

“So, you lost your fucking job?” She asked. “Answer me, why? Why did you?”

His eyes thought the outside rain was way more attractive. So, his vision and depressed demeanour focused away from her.

“Answer me.” She ordered.

“Look mom, It’s not my fault. Some guy, came into our restaurant and smashed it up. Someone dressed as a knight.”

“You kidding me?” She expressed. “Things like that don’t just happen. Tell me the truth…”

“That’s the truth mom!” He cried.

Raymond boggled his face down into a bottle of tears. The thought of what happened crushed him. Lossing his job, then having his mother be disappointed. Under his woollen coat, Raymond casted an illusion of being on his phone. Instead, he was crying. Alone. Sad, he had failed her.

“Mom, I’m sorry…”

Year 11

Chapter 1: Open The Gates

Entering the dark hall, it became clear he was going to have a great year-round. There he met his mates. Following the seats in front of him was Joseph, a popular boy, catering towards his tanned blonde nature of being a fool. But one everyone loved. After that was Mike. The supportive type when things got tough as nails. Although his face could use some ache cream. And beside him sat Henry. Shorter than most, sure he had some negative attention, but everyone in the group respected him. Finally, the one who sat next to Raymond, was his childhood friend Ryan. Snowflake tinted skin which resembled old royalty. To mix his remarkably clean skin, fine clayed red and brown filtered his hair. Whenever Raymond heard him speak, it was of a wiser man, not of a stupid teenager. It didn't matter if Ryan mentioned a joke, or something worthy of being laughed at. He sounded so knowledgeable. He sat cross-legged, resting upon his forehead a Silver and black riptide cap.

"Ryan, take that one off, will you?" His home room teacher urged him. "The show is about to begin."

Having a voice as chill as ice, and a tone of sarcasm, he replied.

"Fine… but what if the fan cuts my hair off?"

Joseph snickered upon hearing his silly worry. Mike followed along, chittering in,

“Yeah miss, I can feel the fans sucking me upwards.”

She scuffed the comment off as Ryan removed his hat.

As soon as they were on, all the lights silenced as their vision gazed towards the front. There, a spotlight from heaven had awoken. Sharply piercing the wooden stage as an anchor would. This time, some younger drama students were chosen to be the annual sacrifices. One which appeased no God, but instead the crowd of embarrassed teenagers. As Henry slid his phone within the pocket of his Yonda pouch, a sly comment bounced from his mouth. Leering out with a groan.

“Stupid fucking play. Why do they make them do this?” The comment shortly thereafter giggled.

Keeping the phone in the pouch but leaving it unlocked had been a common tactic since they were introduced. So, it didn’t bother Raymond, who followed like a sheep. Colliding her footing against the width of the stage, there principle miss attention emerged. Her pink suit stood firm and unshaken against the force of her wrinkles. She appeared confident, something that contrasted with the students who didn’t give a shit about the event.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Her obnoxiously loud high heels overshadowed her tone. “Today, we start the

annual yearly presentation of the standards held by Truth State Highschool!”

Dashing to the front, a boy and girl from year 9 strode in front of her. The boy straddling onto his tucked in pants; and the girl swooping with a twirl which fixed in place. Then, the tapping began.

“Clasp our hands together because we are excited for!” The boy landed out his left hand.

“The brand-new school year” The girl did so with her right.

Spinning around in a skipping humiliation ritual, Raymond could only cover his eyes. Blanketing his embarrassment and awkward expression. As this continued, the instruments behind them began to belt the students into shape.

“Dear God, why?” Raymond hushed to himself.

The boy twirled his gay looking shoes to the crowd. Clapping under his bent knees.

“Me ma got me these black squeaky-clean shoes!”

“Oh yes have your sun hat too!” The girl rhymed.

Keeping in theme, the lady once again spun around. Showing her fingernails to the crowd like Jewellery.

“Remember to leave your rings at home!”

A stage actor dressed in pitch black handed the guy a stack of books. All cladded in generic symbols for subjects.

“Come on now, I can’t wag!” He sung. “Even one lesson unattended isn’t a good look.”

“So you should read the book!” The girl chimed in.

Raymond once more cringed his soul out beside Ryan. Despite it being a part of their usual procession. He couldn’t help but to petition the council to get the school shut down over it. Joseph’s pointing finger then landed on what appeared to be a fat black kid dancing in a fairy dress. As he spun his twirls in the background, Joseph and Mike couldn’t help it. Starved for something to poke fun of, they laughed.

“Getting tired there Raymond.” Ryan turned.

Taking advantage of the absence of light. Raymond decided to fall his eyes slowly. As his head tilted downward, Ryan knew he was all but asleep. By the end, the only one clapping was the principal miss look at me pretty pony. Anchoring herself and looking in the direction of the year 11 body. She found only a few smiles. Most were embarrassed. Either that or they thought study would be a better use of their time.

“What the actual fuck is the point of these ceremonies?” Mike turned to Joseph and Henry.

By the end of that presentation, they had embarked onto their next class. Wearing shame and disbelief.

“They think we’re kids, don’t they?” Raymond remarked.

Some stupid juniors stayed along to play handball way past the early morning period. A time of peace and relaxation before school rattles your bones. Then like hungry chickens, a door was set free. Letting the year 9 hoard run off to class. Soon however, Raymond witnessed some background commotion.

“Get the fuck away from us witch!”

That voice, that damn voice. Everyone knew who it was. Raymond questioned in the first place why people would hover around him. This time was different. It was Charlie. A big and bulky Lebanese type whose hair grew oil and attracted a flowing blur. His ego partly came from his massive stature. Which he either used to intimidate or protect himself. Charlie wasn’t fat as much as he was tall. He had only one emotion, and knew only one thing. Unfiltered rage. Something which haunted both teachers and students alike.

Punch!

Pulling his fist back, Charlie unleashed a slamming punch into his victim. A shy girl. As it collided, a splat of golden blood trickled down her nose. Seeing this unfold, Raymond went full medic mode. As Charlie went leftwards to flex his ego somewhere else, Raymond began pulling bandages from his bag he had gained from a medical program a year prior. Cleaning her nose, he heard sudden footsteps from behind him.

“Raymond. Leave her.” Mike expressed.

He looked up directly at Mike who stood over the 2 like a sworn hawk.

“Why are you helping that witch? Didn’t you know that touching her blood means instant death?”

Raymond instantly retracted his arm from the poor girl. Flinching off her, like a dad running away from child support payments. Getting to his toes, his arms and legs bent outwards like some jungle native. Warey of her fire breathing wounds. Thinking of Mike’s words, it swerved him away. Leaving behind ounces of anxiety, nibbling on his brain.

“I’m… sorry. I… must go.” Raymond retreated.

Leaving her with the bandage. It was as if her touch infected the ground. Which in turn, clung to his bandages. She finished the clean-up. And began walking towards the school’s infirmary. Wailing and crying.

Chapter 2: Can Someone Spare A Knight Some Change?

Waiting for her noble and precious son. Jodie kept the AC on full blast. Yet what occurred last night didn't supersede her. The story he gave, although an emotional display, conjured lies. No he must have done something. Something he wasn't fond of telling. Soon, her car unlocked. Turning behind her, she watched Raymond shuffle his bag beside him.

"So…" She hissed.

"So… what mom?"

"You honestly think that I'd believe your story of some knight getting you fired?"

Raymond remained silent as his mother held him hostage behind the steering wheel. The awkward silence continued.

"Raymond… you know that I KNOW you were lying to me."

"Ok fine mom." Raymond broke the ice. "Just hear me out. I just, fucked up. I can't explain what I did but I'll admit alright."

He suddenly felt the car shatter. Turning down the aircon's breeze, Raymond's mother glared at him from the rearview mirror.

"What did you do!?"

Sitting on evermore shrinking land, nothing but the rays of overpassing sun separated him from his angry mother.

“I… I can’t… say it.”

Having her mother rage almost swerve the entire traffic line, Jodie veered into a street park. Holding a gun to his head, she pulled the car into park mode.

“I don’t like liars…” she expressed.

“Ok fine mom… I… I filled up a tray with ice and… dumped it into the fryer cause… me and my coworkers thought it was funny.”

Jodie’s voice softened and a smile slowly squeezed from her face.

“Oh… you got fired because of that? Seriously?”

The rage metre immediately ceased. Raymond’s eyes shifted towards the flickering window. And soon enough, he went back to daydreaming.

“Just promise me that you’ll find job this afternoon.” Jodie expressed.

“Yeah… I… I will mom.”

Taking a walk through his door, Raymond’s backpack slouched to one side, like some fashion statement.

Excited to be out of time-wasting simulator. He enjoyed his time getting into his room. Dropping his back to the corner of his bed, it was his PC which drove him happy. There, his comfy gaming chair spun in excitement as he turned on his PC. His main setup included a monitor, something which was recently purchased for his birthday. Then a black encased PC, which had more colours flowing through it than the pride flag. The fans; however, blew away the occasional cockroach. Numerous cords ran in and out of compartments. With many of them having unknown purposes to him. One of his mates Mike had been over with Ryan, who decided to help him ages ago. And now, he could be forever in their debt. Upon booting up the PC, he noticed many of his friends were already on the messaging app they used. Joining the call, they were in the middle of what appeared to be an FPS game. Checking Roblox, Raymond quickly joined their match.

“Hey guys.” Raymond alerted them. “I’m on.”

“Nice.” Mike blurted. “Why did you get on later than you usually do?”

“Sorry guys, I just. Was doing stuff.”

Raymond kept what happened in the car between him and his mother a secret. Perhaps due to their double sword. At school, they kept shit talking to a minimum. But out of the pen, it wasn’t as such.

“Guys, remember when we sat down?” Henry started. “Why the fuck was Charlie screaming at?”

“Don’t know. Maybe it’s just roid rage.” Ryan made the group chat slightly snicker.

Then, Raymond remembered. There was a girl he had almost never seen before. That Charlie had assaulted. She was quiet, slivering into the shadows more often than vampires do. Such a thought stunted him, as his laughter quickly eroded at a precision never seen before. He wanted to raise his voice. But before he could, the flicker of her silk black hair disappeared. Ryan flanked behind Raymond who had been camping within some corner.

Toss!

Ryan’s flashbang erupted beside the wall Raymond had been exercising his second amendment behind. Within an instant, Raymond’s character turned into a ghost.

“Raymond what happened…” Joseph uttered in a silly tone.

Suddenly, Raymond’s black cat decided to come knocking. Her prancing tail pressed against the keys of the keyboard. Before dropping her onto the floor, he noticed something odd. Her vision was fixated upon the room’s window. As her stance fixated. Almost to a detriment as some dark, lurking foe waited beside his

window. According to his cat. The spine she possessed shot upwards, tilted and stiffened like a structural poll. Raymond became confused. Daylight was just barely out. But through the tree right outside his first-floor window. Was nothing. To him, he knew the cat wouldn't be lying.

"Why are you acting up?" Raymond turned to patting his cat.

Then, the cat's paws launched a prancing pounce onto the floor. She ran as fast as a cattle dog, spooking Raymond.

"What's up Raymond?" Ryan asked through the mic.

"Nothing, it's just that my cat's being stupid."

As the games dragged on boringly slow, Raymond remembered what his mother asked of him. With a tired expression, a short, laying boom of some yawn exhaled. Laying down on his bed, he doomscrolled for a job he could at least apply for. Filtering out all fast-food jobs, his mouse was instead picking between the retail giants. Something without deep fryers. Each one he emailed had about maybe a 50% chance of denying him. But at least a 100% of stealing his data. WHICH IS WHY YOU SHOULD USE SURF…

Smash!

Erupting through his window like a barrelling bullet. Raymond turned in sheer horror. Using speeds comparable to teenagers closing out of their porn tabs to shut his laptop.

Ahh!

There, from the window, a familiar shadow elongated towards him. Covered in glass, his metal armour had seen better days. Standing up straight, Bascone frisked off his shoulder pads.

“Can someone spare a knight some change?” Bascone asked. “Wow… hi there. You’re that guy from that hot place, correct?”

“What the fuck are you doing here!?” Raymond shouted at him.

“Kinda rude to treat your guests like that.” Bascone placed his hands against his hips.

“You’re no guest… Bascone, you broke into my house and shattered my fucking window!”

Jodie rushed towards the door. Upon opening it, she became surprised and wide mouthed.

“Hello mam. Wanna shag?” Bascone asked.

“Well, who’s this?” Jodie asked. “Is this one of your friends?”

“No, it’s not it’s…”

“Mam, it appears I’m homeless and I need a place to stay. Could you be courteous enough to allow me to live here?” Bascone uplifted his frame.

Jodie’s head steadily tilted towards the clear destruction of the window. Her pupils shrank in visible frustration.

“Who… the hell… did that?” She pointed.

Bascone watched the house cat come crawling into the room, landing right beside him.

“He did it…” Bascone pointed at the cat.

Raymond spent his time cleaning up the mess that Bascone created like a little maid. Whereas Bascone slowly stripped away his armour.

“It’s good to finally have some shelter…” Bascone removed his knee plate.

“You need to take a shower. You stink.” Raymond responded.

With a posh expression, Bascone remarked.

“Frenchmen don’t need to take showers. Unlike bloody Englishmen.”

Frisking the trash bag into a bundle which he can carry, Raymond took one step out of the room.

“Don’t do anything until I get back. Or… I’ll kick you out.” Raymond shot out with one eye and mouth.

Upon returning a minute or so later, Raymond took to unrolling a mattress for the guy to relax in. Bascone laid on it, finding it quite comfy compared to any thatch betting he nested on.

“You’re Raymond, right?” Bascone asked.

“Yeah, that guy you got fired. That’s me.” He replied. “Don’t worry though, I hated it anyways…”

“You are so kind for letting me stay here.”

“Bascone, for as long as you behave, I suppose you can. You’re lucky she thinks the cat did what you did. Plus, she’s just… kind like that. I don’t mind you just… behave…”

By now, Bascone had all but been stripped to his under cloth. A knightly undergarment which stretched across his feet to his waist. And a long-sleeved strung shirt. Lazing around like a grazing animal he says.

“Anyways, what year is it? I can’t find a horse to ride and…”

“Aren’t you just a larper?” Raymond stated. “It’s 2027 if you’ve been living under a rock.”

Bascone’s eyes fell through sheets and ribbons. In a state of utter delirium. He couldn’t believe it. Days prior he had been riding his stupid horse. And now pillars of what he could only describe as being built by the Gods flourished.

“No, it… it can’t be… it was only 1412 for me just a few days ago.”

“You… serious?” Raymond’s calm gently turned sincere.

“Well, I wasn’t lying now, was I?” Bascone crossed his arms. “I’m 20 years old. Born in 1392.”

Testing his word, Raymond quickly dashed over to his desk before bringing to Bascone forbidden knowledge.

“You were before 1492, so you won’t know America exists and…”

Before Bascone’s eyes, befell the world. Raymond rolled out the map which coated Bascone’s fingers. Before him laid wonders nobody could ever dream of.

“So, the world really is flat?” Bascone remarked.

“No, it’s a map you idiot.”

It was like introducing Homer, grand writer of the Iliad to modern Harry Potter. Illustrations of grand continents made we old France seem microscopic. So much so that he couldn't spot it.

"Where… is my homeland?" Bascone asked

Raymond guided his eyes to Western Europe by the tip of his fingers.

"There, that's where France is."

He couldn't believe it. According to the map, France managed to beat back the Angevins. Rejoicing in utter happiness, Bascone rose upwards and began shouting

"We did it! We beat them scum!"

"Technically from this England would go onto create the biggest empire known to man…"

Bascone's quick joy shrouded into what can only be described to be a French frown. Something the French give to tourists when they can't pronounce anticonstitutionnellement Quincaillerie on a stick with extra frog.

"And… where are we?"

All the way on the corner of the map, Raymond's fingers darted to where his kind could only dream of.

"You somehow ended up here."

Drifting with perfect boarders, beautiful beaches and valleys. Red soil and bouncing kangaroos. Bascone landed down under.

“You are in Australia. More specifically, Sydney Australia in New South Wales.”

He had more questions. But to Raymond, it looked like him observing the map fried his brain.

Chapter 3: Toolbox

Around the table of officials within the company, nerds and scientists alike chattered. They argued with no end in sight. Spun in a never-ceasing argument. It suffocated the room like blooming weeds.

“How do we know the machine worked!?” A grey-haired man wearing a suit and tie threw down his papers. “Did we pour investment and countless hours of work all for nothing!?”

“According to the calculations it worked!”

“Well according to my calculations, you can stick your Rubik’s cube up your ass.”

Everyone was ready to rip each other apart. Like caged up roosters, they each pranced at each other. Fighting about who’s in the right and who’s in the wrong.

“We need our money back!” An investor threatened. “You guys conned us out of millions for a stupid project that didn’t even sound real!”

Errr!

All noise ceased. Just as the drop of a pen shattered all sound within the room. There, covered in his cloak. The big daddy arrived. Each footstep made was choaking. Just like little toy soldiers. They all lined up, investors, officials and science representatives alike. Every and all

thought diminished. Unless that be carried, by the man known as.

“Nercea Lionheart we were…”

His eyes darted towards one of the men. Slouching over the table with his briefcase.

“What the fuck do we have here! A crime scene!?” Nercea broke the empty wind. “You are all to be finding out solutions! Not strangling each other’s necks!”

It was only when he arrived. That pretty talk began. He, a smothering cloak of power ceased all discourse. Unlike a kind but vicious ruler. He was all about the money and wouldn’t dare let up. For all he had fell between harshness, his heart and rash but calculated thinking.

“So, any plans you baboons have?” Nercea whipped them into order.

“How do we know if this guy even made it through the portal?” One of the investors ballooned out of anger.

“As to that, I have an ongoing team. Do you think I will waste another attempt to bring him back when we can find him? Perhaps in newspapers?”

“He could be any…”

“Silence!” Nercea ripped a vicious knife straight through the conversation.

Once more, the room deathly fell silent. The only thing heard was his cold, damp words.

“If we find him, we will have to bring him in. Judging by the guy we are talking about, he could be armed and dangerous. What about a search team? Like with guns and…” One of his researchers frowned.

Nercea curled a smile.

“You think me being on an Australian government watchlist, will allow me to send armed troops to track him down?”

Once more, just silence followed. As a breeze from the aircon picked up, he stood forward.

“I have a different solution.” Nercea remarked.

Turning his head, a passive, fake grin emerged blanketed in lies and deception.

“Dear Valerin. Can you come in here and introduce yourself to everyone?”

Like the loud clanging of a woman’s high heels. Her shoes clambered away as she began her sexy walk into the room. There, everyone was drawn to her. She was beautiful. A trickster, a dealer, a spy and most of all, a Valerin. She wore ruby red glasses, projecting a vibrant cuteness whilst hiding her true intentions. Her head, combed and forged into pure blonde beauty. Short, but

tied in a bun which could hide all sorts of gadgets. She could blend in and out of action. Valerin displayed her fragrance like a princess. Danced in robes of some beautiful office dress. Her makeup, muttered swift but remarkably manipulative to the touch.

“Hey everyone…” Valerin introduced herself.

Before anyone could ask if he had told an escort to dress pretty and show up to office, Nercea pressed his hands behind his back.

“Known to us and our many agencies. She has flirted and manipulated numerous poor souls that got in our way. Either from smoothing out perfect deals or eliminating competition. She isn’t a killer. But she has killer looks.”

“How the fuck will that help us find this guy?”

“Bascone of Orleans is a knight, isn’t he?” Nercea fought back. “We send this girl in, and slowly, he will grow attachment with her. And when the job is done, she’ll lure him in won’t you…”

Valerin nodded, unable to rebel or resist. By looking at her closer. The team alike couldn’t shake off her expression. It was, robotic. Almost unshaken by Nercea. Yet, they hadn’t ever seen her in their entire life. Rubbing her back however, turned on the spark which would eventually set her personality.

“Here’s the plan. She along with many people will spend time searching everywhere for this guy. Left and right, north and south. Then once found, I’ll send her out to spring that trap…” Nercea clasped his hands. “Everyone dismissed!”

The following crowd vacated the room. But Valerin and Nercea leered far behind. With each of them flinching away from Nercea as they passed. There, the two were alone. Time passed as Valerin slowly crept up to the window. She watched across the river the concrete jungle she lived in. But behind her, Nercea approached with blades in hand. Gently, Nercea rested his paws against the width of her shoulders. His hands as cold as ice. She gently wheezed before adjusting to his bitter grasp. Like a powerful force, he began rubbing up and down. Giving her a hypnotic massage. Luring in close to her ear, he uttered.

“Valerin… my beauty. Do you know who you are to me?” Nercea asked.

She had no reply. Her stance was like that of solid ice. Unshaken by his advances. Nercea twisted her centred shoulders, while he continued violating her space.

“You are my toolbox. If I want a screwdriver, I will get a screwdriver, If I want a hammer and nail, I shall take a hammer and nail. And just like a toolbox, if you become

broken, I shall just throw you away and buy a new one…”

The trotting towards her workstation was a long, and dusted journey. All the eyes rolled onto her. Yet she appeared numb to all of it. No matter the attention and praises. It meant nothing but a crushing curse. To think all she was worth was her looks. Nothing more, nothing less. Upon arriving to her desk, she sat her ass down and placed forth her slave papers. Beside her, was the photo printed coffee given to her. Valerin’s blank slate eyes shifted towards the cup. Black water echoed out the very same expression she gave. Anonymous. What stared back was the live she had lived thus far, and a life that she wants to escape from.

Chapter 4: Behold The Witch

Allocating his shoulder downwards, Raymond instinctively withdrew his bag from the upstairs port rack. Joined by numerous girls. By which made up majority of his English class. Raymond quickly turned tail, remembering it was finally lunch. The juniors were out singing, scrapping with one another like pack animals on the bottom floor. Whereas the seniors were glad they didn't have to read Shakespeare no more.

Bump!

A familiar, wrathful figure barrelled out of the classroom. As if waiting for him to get in range.

"Why did you help that witch playboy?" Charlie demanded to know.

"Look mate, I love writing plays but I'm no playboy." Raymond reasoned. "Isn't that a magazine?"

"You cursed us all you stupid fool." Charlie took issue with.

Then just like that, Charlie turned the other direction. Satisfied by his actions. Catching the hike down the stairs, Raymond was met by Joseph. A bubbly but yet mannered individual. Right as he pulled out his debit card, he remarked.

"Just ignore him, Raymond."

“Why are we even friends with that asshole?” Raymond shot back.

“Honestly, I don’t know. He just hangs out with us I guess. He can be a cool guy if you get to know him.”

There, they met the end of the stairs as Joseph turned to the direction of the tuck shop. A grand jewel of heart disease and deep-fried goodness. Instead, Raymond diverged path, choosing to go to the friend table.

Turning tail around the conveniently placed music room, a babble of both soft, soothing blues and a poorly sung tunes rubbished outwards. He could listen and almost however, fall in love with the melody. It had a perfect score by the guitars that thankfully this time, had been tuned perfectly by a teacher. Not by an idiot 7th grader who wanted to do visual arts this term. The ranging drummer held the skills of both a manic monkey and a competent player though. Regardless, time had all but vanished in front of his eyes when crossing a plain, grassy patch. In front of his eyes, Ryan, Mike and Henry had made their way already to their favourite spot. Mike and Herny like always, sat directly opposite of Ryan. Who always had a seat open for Raymond. Ryan turned his head, hearing those usual footsteps of Raymond.

“Hey Raymond!” Ryan whistled out towards.

Raymond like cattle, was drawn to the bells and whistles. He nested beside Ryan instantly.

“How’s your play going?” Ryan asked.

“I haven’t really touched my drama assessment. All I can say is that I’ve hit a creative dead end seemingly…”

Suddenly, a burst of laughter erupted between Mike and Henry. Ryan raised an eyebrow as Raymond was too busy, shuffling papers and books from his sack.

“What is it?” Ryan asked.

Mike flipped his phone. Like always, Joseph had a bad habit of keeping around a collection of his own arse pics. Far gone from the usual humour of 5th grade fart jokes. He had many, unfortunately. Raymond saw it before recoiling back with a smile.

“What the fuck cunt?” He blurted.

“It’s one of the finest out of his collection.” Henry remarked in an ironic fashion.

From behind, a pair of friends joined the party.

“Wassup… we playing catch or what?”

Behind Raymond, was Joseph in all his glory. Tossing around a generic footy that looked to have been pulled from some sewer. Beside him, Charlie awaited with catcher in hand.

“You got a ball?” Ryan remarked. “Yeah, we can play.”

Getting to their feet, the pack of teenage boys hurled their packs on. Raymond stretched, yawning the morning sun out of him.

“Better than sitting down here all day.” Mike told Joseph.

Spreading out by huge margins, the group emerged upon the oval in some circular pattern. Ryan extends his leg, and once he turned to Henry, he booted the bastard square in the air. It came screaming down from the heavens. Due to his short size, the ball flew overhead, smacking a ditch beside Henry.

Boot!

Henry fired outwards a powerful kick towards Mike.

“I got it Henry!” Mike remarked.

Running out to the ball, he perfectly caught it. Making everyone impressed.

“Good fucking catch mate!” Raymond called out in a pleased expression.

“Oi Brah!” Charlie shouted. “Pass me cunt!”

Knowing that the ball's fate was sealed, Mike booted the ball over towards Charlie. Now, within his grasp, Charlie turned towards the treehouse.

"Charlie!" Ryan cried. "Don't!"

It was already too late. With the power of a true AFL player, he unleashed all his might within the ball

Boot!

Slashing his foot into the up-rear end of its asshole, the flappy piece of rubber cascaded through the knots within Charlie's shoe. Flying against the particles of air, the missile strode ever so near the treehouse. Then,

Bang!

As expected, the ball exploded through the window of the treehouse. Upon Charlie's superhero stance curling a sly laugh, everyone began throwing a hissy fit over his decision.

"Charlie you fucking idiot!" Mike shouted.

"Don't worry guys, I'll go get it…"

Before Henry started trekking over no man's land. Ryan placed his hand over his shoulder.

"Don't do it…" Ryan began whispering.

From afar, Raymond approached nearby, being unable to hear what exactly was being said. Upon Ryan finishing his statement, Henry's eyes widened.

"N… no…" Henry shook. "We can't get it. It's the witch's lair…"

Each of them avoided that corner of the oval like the plague. Raymond raised a brow. Confused.

"Is it really cursed?" He asked Ryan.

"If you wanna die, sure. Go on…"

Raymond's hair off his back extended upwards out of fear and terror.

"D… death?" Raymond echoed.

The others headed back. All except for Raymond. His gaze fixated upon the treehouse in all its archaeological value. There, a window was fixed. The same one Charlie managed to unleash an ICBM through. But a black, purpose cloth covered the door. He gazed there, increasingly. Unable to manoeuvre his gaze away. Blowing out to him, the cloth drew him in. Just like that, he was hooked.

Ring!

The lunch bell absorbed their attention. As back to work they were. During 5th period. Raymond remembered all he had was a study session. By that I mean sitting on his device for an hour. When he got up, he noticed everyone had all but vanished into their classrooms. There, he began the walk to the witch's lair. Upon reaching the open oval, he headed directly towards the treehouse. At first, he witnessed it from afar. Then, his heart began beating rapidly out of seemingly nowhere. Raymond stopped for a moment, feeling his anxiety blanket his manner of thinking. But yet, his curiosity paved an even stronger feeling. By now, he had passed through the barrier Ryan had mentioned. Contrary to what he spoke of, the flesh off his skin didn't subside.

"Is it really cursed?" Raymond asked himself.

By the time he had reached the foot of the house, a bolted in ladder presented itself. Strapped to bundles of rope. Raymond grappled onto one of these planks and began the great scale. Feeling tiny spines of wood braid his fingertips. Looming his legs up and down, Raymond was met by a tiny veranda. His eyes darted across the old oak. Noticing how it shifted and morphed more into that of a castle rather than an actual treehouse, the more he observed. And all, had been drawn to that black mystery. Behind its luring remark. A spindle of cold breeze shot out from the inside and out. Like particles bursting from a cell. Raymond pressed one foot down, creaking the

entire floorboard. He pressed within his lungs a deep, gulping swallow, fearful for what laid within. Stretching onward a fingertip so shaking, that it vibrated the panel. Suddenly, he pressed his index finger a bit too deep.

Hiss!

The snake like noise startled Raymond's balance. Almost sending him tumbling to the floor below. Getting good footing once more, he tailored towards the cloth for one final look.

Building up the courage, Raymond once more flickered the blind away from blocking the door. At first, he couldn't see anything. For his eyes were not manufactured for dark, endless caverns. The darkened desire fluctuated, creating a choaking amount of blackness. That was until, he saw, the witch. He had a good few seconds to look at her. Noting that her skin was as white as the tops of every mountain. Containing no more than her pretty eyes, the occasional mole and her school uniform. Those eyes fixated upon the blinding light of the outside world. Turning around as if the sunlight burned her skin. Like a vampire queen, she shrieked.

“Who dares to encroach upon my slumber?” Her voice asked. “I am Haffel. The witch of this hereby treehouse. I have been haunting this place for over 800 years.”

“How… old are you?” Raymond asked her, seemingly terrified.

“16.” She replied.

Calming down, Raymond noticed that upon her nose had been rows upon rows of bandaged, and occasional stitching covering her wound. Her black hair flowed endlessly from some bucket hat you could use to store water in. But upon getting a closer look at him, her eyes fluttered.

“Raymond, do the commoners refer to you as?”

“Yes… how do you know my name?” Raymond asked.

She didn’t concern herself with his question. She was much busier chewing and consuming the paper straw from her chocolate milk.

“Hey… Haffel. Can, I get the ball back? That one which one of the guys kicked in here?”

She pointed to the corner of her frame. There, the terror device stood. Raymond gently walked over towards the

ball. Hearing out each and every crackle of the floorboards as a possible breakage.

“Hey Haffel… you don’t seem to be cursed right? I’d like to know more about you if that works. Wanna meet up here and walk home from school together?”

“You expect a witch like me to have a home?” Haffel replied, turning her head. “I live in the darkness of… 45th Park Lane.”

With his bag straggling along his back, he approached the meeting spot he planned to have with her. And in fact, she did make it. Dressed in the annual uniform expected by the school. That of course was under a thick layer of some black jumper she wore over her head. Raymond grabbed a hunkered part of her hood before peeling it away.

Hiss!

As the sun touched her skin, she revolted away. Instead, she flickered the hood on immediately. As they reached the road back home, he couldn’t help but to bring up Charlie.

“That piece of shit Charlie has been getting on my nerves as of late. Yet everyone else tolerates him…”

Haffel recoiled into her hood. As if disturbed by that forbidden name. Raymond continued until noticing her silently begging for him to stop. So, he did.

“I’m sorry ok…” Raymond remarked. “I’ll stop if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Thank you…”

Now by the foot of her house. Raymond extended a welcomed goodbye as she hit the stairs to her porch. Climbing up the shanty house Australians would pay billions for.

“Goodbye Haffel. It’s nice to meet you!”

Chapter 5: Feed The Unexpected

Making his way through the swamped and crime ridden parts of Sydney. Raymond wiped a sly particle of sweat from his face. Thankfully, he had Google maps. As well as his house address not being too far. Raymond raised a cough before making a sharp turn around the corner. Not expecting to see all but friendly faces glaring back at him. From Haffel's house, his surroundings made it reasonable to believe she kept bars on her windows at night. And that the average rental price was kept down by all the burglaries. The concrete he walked on didn't fare well either. A sharp overgrowth of grass overshadowed the path. Elongating their fangs to brush against his footing whenever he walked. Then by the time he hit a brick wall, the flora had all but vanished. Instead replaced by a fishnet metal fence. As he approached, a mysterious hooded figure watched and whistled. Fiddling with how deep and high his tongue could produce a sorrowful blow. By about a few feet from the man. He looked up at Raymond.

"Got spare change mate?" The mysterious man asked.

"Nah mate, I got nothing for a homeless person like yourself…"

Instead of retreating his hand within the confines of his pocket, to removing forth a handy shiv, the man raised an eyebrow. Almost smiling as the smell of fermented smokes eroded from his teeth.

“Who you calling homeless mate?” The man asked. “I be a PHD in philosophy”

Raymond stopped, turning his head in pure awe. Having found an intellectual in rough clothing.

“You have a PHD?” Raymond replied to his bazar claim. “Well, who did you study?”

“My thesis was on a Fello called along the lines of B.F. Skinner. Look him up if you got time when you get home.”

Soon Raymond’s gaze pierced from behind the man. This stranger hunkered along with a couple of other misfits. The group stretched across an open carpark. Perhaps the cops didn’t dislodge them. Due to the many buildings surrounding the area acting like sarcophaguses. Rotten, and forgotten by society.

“The name’s Adam.” He introduced himself on a whim. “This here homeless community is full of the wisest people you’d ever meet.”

He took in the sight even further as Adam pointed towards everyone. A tire was used to contain a bundle of flame, which a few of the homeless folk kept to. Meanwhile, a lady whose skin was as white as Haffel’s could be seen painting majestic figures of both people and animals. Not the banana taped to a wall type shit. She seemed to almost be Haffel’s sister.

“Come with me, Raymond, was it?”

Then, Raymond’s blood cycled cold unlike ever before. He just casually said his name, despite him never seeing the man. Yet his smoke drew him nearer. Towards the centre, a green tent was erected. The entire thing was pitched like an entire living quarters soldiers would come from and enter on a daily basis. Raymond flickered away the tent’s entrance before the darkness engulfed him. As his heart pounded, he somehow trusted this man. Adam faced away from Raymond, so his back perforated his vision. Upon lighting another cigarette, he stated

“Do you know about pigeons?”

“Well, yeah… what about them?”

Adam’s back slowly turned. Casting almost an entire spell upon Raymond.

“Pigeons are small, but yet even under human influence they have managed to grow far beyond their prior reach. You can take out entire nests. Yet they still thrive.”

Adam’s brazen words set a centrifuge through Raymond’s eyes. He smiled, knowing the feeling of being listened to. Suddenly, he smirked.

“How’s your play going Raymond?”

Once again, Raymond couldn’t conclude who this man even was. He caught another sudden cold breeze patting

his neck. The tent's cloak spurred him on the back. But by the time he turned around, the man had all but vanished. Raymond opened the tent to the open air. Not to see Adam anywhere. Instead, a cascading flutter of pigeons drew his attention. Each of them, fleeing from his eyes.

Under late afternoon sun, Raymond had been glad to reach the tiny staircase to his house.

"That was a hard trip…" Raymond related to in his daze. "Shit… how far was her house really?"

Upon meeting the door, he was met by a not so pleasant surprise. There, Bascone stood directly in the corner with his hands raised. Seemingly terrified of something right below him at his feet. Raymond observed closer. It had been his cat resting upon a pile of paper bags. Something cats for some reason adore more than conventional bedding. Bascone's eyes dwelled towards Raymond, asking for safety and refuge.

"Help me…" Bascone whispered. "It's a black cat…"

"Wait, you're scared of… black cats?" Raymond replied with a laughing smile.

"They are witches, bringers of bad luck… and deceitful curses…"

Raymond then asked.

“How long have you been stuck there for?”

“A few hours at least.” Bascone whispered. “Hurry up and burn her… I need to pee.”

Facepalming his disappointment that a man such as him, could be befallen to that of a cat. Raymond had to step in. Swooping the cat away from Bascone, Bascone gleefully rushed to the veranda which he took a hot, soaking piss.

“Do you know about the toilet inside?” Raymond asked.

“I don’t know how to use that thing… it’s way too high.”

Quickly checking the bathroom, Raymond gagged, almost vomited. Piss had been building up in the fucking sink.

“Not the sink Bascone!” Raymond yelled.

Taking his cat, he approached Bascone. Aiming to expose Bascone to her. And perhaps letting him realise cats meant no harm. As Bascone laid firm on the couch, Raymond shuffled the cat over towards him. Cradling her back like a baby.

“Bascone… black cats aren’t cursed. Curses are not real.” Raymond told him.

His head quickly rotated and he as expected, jumped off the couch.

“Get that thing away from me!”

Pushing him in the corner, Bascone’s hands raised like a stick up.

“Bascone… pat him…”

Forced against his will, he gently pressed his hand against the roof of the cat’s head.

“Good kitty… there… that’s a good… witch…” Bascone pleaded with his life.

“It’s a cat… not a witch.” Raymond told him again.

Scratch!

The cat became fearful of Bascone, leading to its lashing claw to gently graze his finger. Raymond panicked. Quickly dropping the cat onto the floor.

“Don’t worry Bascone, it’s just a tiny scratch. I get them a…”

Thud!

Bascone fainted. Little did Raymond know, a medieval knight’s weakness isn’t that of an arrow. It’s small microbes. Either that or frogs and cheese.

Bascone awoke once more to Raymond's sick prank. Whilst he was on his laptop, Raymond during Bascone's time out had managed to make the cat comfortable on top a pillow. One which sat right above Bascone's head. In a panic, he blurted.

"Raymond… get this… little Satan off me…"

"Why do I get so many emails?" Raymond thought to himself.

"Raymond! Help me out here dammit!"

"Wait… no way! A job offering at Kmart!"

"Fucking help me dammit!"

Chapter 6: Found Ya!

Creating a faint sense of calmness within Bascone, Raymond's vision and legs quickly guided his knightly friend through an entire catacomb of, what all Bascone could interpret as being some sort of divine space. In his long years he hadn't seen anything so majestic as rapid consumer spending. The bright lights and shifting masses of endless crowds frightened Bascone. He kept his fear to himself however, relying on his suit and armour to keep out all the fear.

"So… Raymond… your interview, where exactly is it?"

"Just up from this elevator." He pointed.

In the distance, a vamped box, according to Bascone used mechanisms of some advanced species. To bring people to and from the tops of the clouds.

"Is that, where we see and meet God?" Bascone shook his finger.

"No, you idiot… it's an elevator. You enter it. If you don't like it, travel up from those stairs like a gym bro."

All the fear quietly descended away, noticeable to Raymond when Bascone noticed a group of collage aged girls dressed in booty shorts and sipping their $100 lattes.

"Well… you go meet God, because I got some time in heaven" Bascone replied creepily.

Raymond sidelined a disgusted look as Bascone walked in beside them. Feeling the need to frown as Bascone drew near. Approaching the girls in his regular fashion, he began flirting with them. Unable to hear what exactly he was saying, it wasn't until Raymond heard a scream when he realised it was a good time to turn tail.

"Hey Bascone… I'm heading off now!" Raymond shouted to the rejected Bascone.

Entering the huge store, he had been greeted by a door person who he interpreted as security. Just without the way one would dress. Sure, his blue shirt looked like something out of a cop movie. But all he could do was smile and wave, praying no one would shank him.

"Hi there…" the door man greeted him.

He quickly turned away to sneeze before Raymond could speak.

"Hey… just let the managers know I'm here for the interview." Raymond asked of him.

"Yeah, sure mate." He replied.

Directing himself to the service desk, he watched rows upon rows of people anchoring in on the poor ladies manning such place. Raymond kicked back, waiting beside a shelf with chargers designed to blow up upon

use. Waving a yawn, he couldn't help but to cringe at the possible things Bascone could be doing. That thought was abruptly solvent upon the polite approaching of one of the store's managers.

"Hey mate… you're Raymond, correct?" She asked.

"Well, yes… hi there. I have come for an interview."

Raymond tailed her up another flight of stairs before being greeted by another middle-aged woman. As the pair sat down, they stared thick and thin at him. The awkward silence continued as one of the ladies slid to the side, grabbing a list of questions little Raymond had to reply to. In front of him were two types of elders within the company. One of them, that being angel was the one who had picked him up from the service desk. Her demeanour was as sweet as the treats she enjoyed. Whereas the other, devil, ran sulfuric blood as old as the great Babylonians. Regardless, their questions brought much pressure upon him.

"Why did you want this job?" Angel asked.

"Well, I'm looking for opportunity for personal and career growth whilst… having a neat paying job."

"How sophisticated are your skills at presenting a store whilst maintaining customer service at a high level." Devil's snark began.

“I… I like to think I can make the store look clean and tidy… as for…”

Devil and Angel began hearing the same address from the person on the door.

“Hey managers, I’m feeling really sick right now…”

Ahchoo!

The loud sneeze prompted another headache for the management staff. As they had to organise another person to cover for him. But as Angel turned away to phone off duty staff, Devil had other plans.

“Hey Raymond… what if we give you a trial instead?” Her words began falling into place.

“Yeah sure.” Raymond jumped at the opportunity.

Once at ground zero, the chaos began. The previous door person fled the scene upon seeing Raymond walking down to the door dressed in uniform. Glad to be finally free from hours of boredom. Quickly, the morning rush gave Raymond a hard time. Without any know how on operating his PDT, he began to feel overwhelmed. Left and right, customers of all ages came barrelling towards him. Even the oldest of cheaply made consumers on walker sticks felt like rushing bullets. Finally, he had come towards the end of a massive customer wave. Just

as quick as they had appeared, they vanished. Allowing him to gather his thoughts, Raymond loomed his head around. Spindling his neck for any more customers. Then, Raymond heard once a silent panting from behind him, become annoyed and enraged. Raymond turned to see Bascone. Frantically wheezing as if he had been chased by security.

“By the hand of God how have we been able to continue humanity for another thousand years?”

“Bascone?” Raymond uttered. “You didn’t get into trouble, did you?”

“Oh, hi Raymond… good to see you. You gotta tell me man. How do I pick up women in this generation?”

“And how exactly have you been approaching them?”

“How we usually do it you know back then. A couple of hands up skirts and…”

Bascone witnessed as Raymond’s eyes furiously groaned. And within an instant, Raymond replied,

“You can’t keep doing that man. I’m disgusted and ashamed of you… look you’ve been nothing but trouble. Even though I’m nice to you. You can’t treat women the way you do…”

Veering around his vicinity. Raymond witnessed what appeared to be some junky woman. Cloaked in a torn

shirt and wearing an outfit which screamed trouble. Even worse, as she approached. The woman handed Raymond a receipt for only 5 items.

“Wait lady… you have more than 5 items!” Raymond screamed. “Get back here! She stole it!”

Unable to move from the door, the lady began to fully sprint with her stolen goods. Bascone noticed, but yet saw opportunity. He needed to know how women worked these days. And even more, needed Raymond to not abandon him. Raymond turned to an employee, telling her,

“Someone stole a lot! Can you tell the managers!?”

By the time he turned back, Bascone was gone. The thief was at first relaxed and began roaming away, looking for more stores to steal from. Which was until.

“Get back here twat!”

Bascone brought his sword upon her, hacking at the side of her trolley. In a panic, she picked up moving, crying out for security. Ironically the same people who knew about her habits. She ran around a corner, as her trolley flew to the side. Soon, Bascone followed. Then she ran into an elevator, rapidly pushing the button to descend downward before the bustling man approached. Thankfully, the doors closed as Bascone was a mere few feet away from her.

“Curse you!” He screamed.

Then, he had an idea. Seeing a volley of stairs, he hit them hard, marching down them at quick haste. Calm once more, the lady cooled down. But as the door opened.

“Give it back bitch!”

Kick!

Escorting the cart back, he rode behind Raymond who had been focused on waiting for the managers to assist with what happened. As Raymond heard the screeching of wheels, he turned to see Bascone return the trolley full of goods.

“Why… did you do that?” Raymond requested.

“Consider this a gift of friendship.”

Before Raymond could thank him, he noticed the managers approaching from far away.

“Bascone… quickly hide. They’ll think you stole it.”

Bascone fled, deciding to blend in with the crowds outside. As much as a knight in shining armour could. Security approached Raymond, seeing the score he made on his first day. He was really impressed. And when management neared, they too were satisfied.

“I haven’t seen your face before…” security mentioned. “The name’s Shannan.”

“So, Raymond, how did you exactly stop all this from getting stolen?” Angel asked.

“I just… held onto the trolley and she eventually let go.”

“Wow… seems like you’re fit for door. Congrats mate you’re hired.” The lady proclaimed.

From the corner of his eye. He could only wink at Bascone as he winked back.

“By the way, have you seen a guy dressed as a knight punching any babies around here?”

“Ahh… no…” Raymond took a sly look at Bascone from afar. “No, I haven’t…”

Approaching Nercea’s desk with a ferociously focused expression. She grabbed what seemed to have been a newspaper from her desk. Slamming it onto his desk to Nercea’s delight, Valerin remarked as she pointed to the article reading,

“Man dressed as a knight in Sydney threatens to punch baby, shoppers outraged.”

“This the one you’re after?”

Taking a look at the paper, he whisked a cold-hearted drink while observing the crazy title, which looked to have come straight out of Florida. Perfectly so, the image taken of him, matched that of a depiction kept in storage from almost a thousand years ago.

“Perhaps it is… seems like this man is as heartless as they can get… Valerin. I got a new task for you.”

Chapter 7: The Baby Deserved It!

Within the back seat, Raymond once more found it rather hard getting used to some guy dressed as a knight.

Each corner prompted an opportunity for his metal waist to slide, banging the side of the car while making Raymond's hip hurt. Bascone however, became mesmerised. Darting his head around like some kid in a candy store.

"Man, if I had a… what is this horse called again?" Bascone asked Raymond.

"We call it a car. Cars drive on the road." Raymond replied.

"If I had a car like this, I could stride up to miss princess, daughter of the French king instead of shagging my sister."

Pfffhh!

Raymond unexpectedly spat out his drink with the velocity of a dragon's hurl. Jodie in the front seat remained eye widened, unsure how to react or respond.

"I'm sorry what?" Jodie questioned with a dead look in the mirror.

"What? Did you think all the pretty girls in Orleans weren't related?"

“Bascone stop… please I’m begging with you stop.” Raymond turned and cried with a whimpering howl.

Calming down, Jodie smile slowly built up again. Thinking of something else she worded,

“Well… how was the job interview?”

Raymond after cleansing his lips the soda, remarked,

“Yeah actually, it went very well. I was hired right on the spot.”

“Good on ya… now keep it. There won’t be any more ice in the fryers won’t there be?”

“Yeah mom… there won’t be any fryers to put ice in.” Raymond seemed pleased.

“Well, well… everything in your life is going quite swimmingly. You have a job, a nice school with friends, there even is some girl waiting at home who wants to meet you.” Jodie reminisced on Raymond’s situation.

“Wait what?”

Moment’s prior, Jodie had a bundle of washing she placed upon the washing line. Little did she know, as she started hanging them up. A pair of Smiling, tiny eyes pierced upwards from the bottom of the stairwell.

“Is Raymond home!?”

Ahhh!

“She frightened the fuck out of me.” Jodie finished.

“Wait… what did she look like?” Raymond asked curiously.

Upon arriving, Raymond made a forward walk to the front door. Wanting to haul anchor to adorn normal clothing. Dressed in his newly acquired uniform. The adolescent noticed as he approached the stairwell, what appeared to be a blackened shadow subsiding below his footsteps. Making his way to the bottom, he took a look inward.

“Hi Raymond.” Haffel uttered.

“How did you find my house?” Raymond mentioned, fitted for interrogation.

Haffel was lost within thought for a few seconds. Trying to apply any excuse she could mass manufacture. Springing her hands into a fist, she popped them out like a firework.

“Dark magic.” Haffel hissed and wheezed.

Bascone headed down the stairs to see what Raymond had been up to.

“Haffel.” Raymond began. “Why did you hide under here?”

“Cause Raymond, the sun pierces my skin.”

“You’re wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt and long skirt.” Raymond started to talk her out of the delusion.

Before she could be convinced witches were perhaps not real. Bascone just had to butt in. With a shrieking squeal,

“Witch!” Bascone screamed, pointing while flinching away. “Raymond get away from her!”

“Bascone ya cunt!” Raymond shouted. “Stop it!”

“You just called me a woman’s vague, didn’t you?” Bascone became disgruntled suddenly. “You are my friend, under her cursed spell.”

As Haffel started crying, Raymond wanted to hit Bascone over the head with a shovel. So, he decided to take Haffel in. Who’s back surely wasn’t best fit for squatting down for an hour or so. Once boxing her up like a cat inside the house, Raymond snapped the pair into an excruciating handshake.

“Bascone… treat her with kindness now. Shake her hand.”

“What if I don’t want to?” Bascone shuttered.

“You can pack up your bible and leave.”

With a huge sigh eroding from his mouth, Bascone took off his helmet and introduced himself.

“Fine, I’ll be friends with you. Witch…”

Sharing a handshake, Haffel had so many questions.

“Raymond…” Haffel finally had the courage to speak. “Who… is this?”

“Ah… Bascone?” Raymond sat by the spectator seat. “He’s…”

“I’m Sir Bascone of Orleans. A knight from France. And you here are a scourge of Satan…”

“Bascone…” Raymond warned with a leering display of annoyance.

But from the corner of Haffel’s eye, the conversation soon became irrelevant.

“Oh… kitty!”

Haffel sat down beside Raymond’s cat, who was used to mythical beasts and cursing winds stroking its head. Bascone sat across from Haffel by the dinner table.

Watching her with a wary eye, he kicked back into his thoughts. There, two tiny plush like figures of Bascone emerged. One dressed as an angel, whilst the other wore thick red horns of a beast. The devil.

"Bascone… maybe Raymond is right. She seems to be an innocent girl more focused on cats than curses." His angel side spoke.

"Yeah… friends are cool, but do you see those matches over there?"

Down by the yard, Bascone had erected a long wooden pole stretching about a couple feet over Haffel's happy demeanour. Haffel meanwhile, was cocked up in a fragrance of delusional. As utter ignorance picked up, Raymond opened the door to the outside patio. Causing Haffel's head to turn.

"Hi Raymond!" Haffel called out to. "Can I get my candy now!?"

"Bascone!" Raymond shouted at as he picked up speed.

"Ah yes… Raymond, could you help me out and pass me those sticks over there?"

Raymond screamed.

"You're setting her on fire!"

Haffel started connecting the dots, she had been tied up by a bundle of rope. Sat upon a pile of grass slowly filling with twigs and wood. Then, she screamed.

Ahh!

Before anything got out of hand, Raymond untied her.

The pair of Haffel and Raymond sat together on the couch as Raymond began calming her down. Thankfully for him, her tears crept down into the hollow parts of her pupils. Allowing for new sprouts to form. She was over the traumatic yet random occurrence.

“Haffel… I’m sorry for… not keeping an eye on Bascone.”

“Is he… really what he claims to be?” Haffel asked.

“Apparently. Just keep it a secret. Whatever you do, don’t say anything to anyone about him.”

A few seconds passed before Haffel’s cute smile returned to shape.

“Oh Raymond…” Haffel’s pea sized brain flicked on. “I remembered now why I came here.”

She took Raymond to his room, and from the window which had been long since curtained up. A present laid destined to be loved and worn by Raymond.

“I just wanted to say… thank you… thanks for… walking home with me last time.”

Said red jumper, although cheap to the touch, brought upon Raymond a smile. Woven from one of the many factories Target relies on. He placed the bottom above his head before fitting the whole item on. Popping out his head, Raymond turned to Haffel with an expression of gratitude.

“Wow… this is lovely.” Raymond replied. “Thank you for such a gift…”

Haffel blushed in return. Enjoying a faint smile which brought upon a rebellion on her grim side.

“Glad you like it.” She expressed fondness towards his words.

Raymond spent the next few minutes showing Haffel around his room. Like a teenager his age, cleanliness was a bit of an afterthought. Afterall, he didn’t expect some home invader. That was all until,

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Three bursts of what shivered to be impatient rattling came from Raymond’s door. The pair already inside, noticed the metallic clanging. So, it was obvious it was Bascone.

“Raymond! And… witch… I need help with getting a maiden.”

Opening the door, Bascone with his helmet appeared to be full of tears. Drowning out the once prideful Bascone.

“Maiden?” Haffel asked.

“He means a woman.” Raymond replied with a cursing sigh. “Haffel, for some reason he’s been really asking to shag just about any woman he meets.”

“Why didn’t he try with me?” Haffel replied, not understanding the weight of her words. “You said every woman. So, if he didn’t ask me then technically… it’s a lie…”

Raymond became silent as she didn’t fully realise what she said.

“Ever heard of witch cooties?” Bascone uttered.

“Stop calling her a witch Bascone.”

Haffel and Raymond made themselves comfortable, sitting upon the bed in the room. As Bascone begged and pleaded.

“Come on… you got to help me.” Bascone pleaded.

“Aren’t men like yourself meant to treat women with kindness as a knight like yourself? Did anyone tell you not to touch women right as you meet them?”

“Well that’s how we flirted back in the day.”

Raymond’s long, drawn-out words imprinted Haffel with a severe case of boredom. So much so, she instead took Raymond’s cat who was once all alone. Before snuggling alongside it.

“Will you help me?” Bascone asked.

“I have maths study… so not right now.”

“Perhaps tomorrow then sire.”

“Don’t call me that.” Raymond shrugged. “But sure, if it stops you from sexual assault then whatever.”

Lights of the open castle layer, by which meant Raymond’s bedroom had all but ceased. Bascone, stripped of his cladded armour, stayed up to seemingly annoy Raymond. Like the occasional mosquito.

“You know, my time centuries ago was a tough one…” Bascone uttered.

“Yeah, I’m sure it was.” Raymond seemed uninterested.

“Bloody English had occupied me hometown… and those fucking longbows… I’m glad I murdered many of them.” Bascone rippled in his voice.

“Wait, you’ve killed before? I guess it’s not surprising considering that’s your job.”

“Well, if it wasn’t women I was after, it was racking up numerous dead English. I’d enjoy a bit of slashing. One time I managed to kill all three who dared to scale up a ladder’s path.”

“We’re you around in the Battle of Agincourt?”

“No, I wasn’t… did we win?” Bascone asked.

“Probably best not to google it.” Raymond fell asleep.

Chapter 8: Will This Last Forever?

Sinking towards the modern life as an Australian citizen, Bascone had been by now, well accustomed to massive crowds. He walked beside both Raymond and Haffel. Whereas Raymond was fine adorning normal clothes, Haffel had to go all quirky. Shadowing her head with a choaking black hood, keeping her further and further away from the sun's grasp.

"Bascone, I appreciate you wearing under clothes rather than your entire outfit but… you could use a shower."

"Non… French people don't rely on what the pesky English call, good hygiene."

Pack to the brim like sardines in a can. Raymond's local plaza personified numerous personalities. Street girls and boy entering and exiting the dazzling lit shops. Eager to waste their money on consumer spending, then complain about it later. Front and foremost were the tiles, glowing a greyish dark nature. Plastered down a flight of stairs was the outsides of what appeared to be a shopping mall. Owned. And just like clockwork, the machine kept ticking. On the side of Haffel, a group of girls. Perhaps of her age waded by like 2000's girls in long jeans. From her hood, her eyes crept upwards. Staring at them, she unleashed a loud

Hiss!

Catching the girls off guard, they quickly booked it. Believing some wild animal was under the jumper.

“Bascone.” Raymond pointed and commanded. “See that clothing store? I want you to buy a nice pair of clothes. And mate, don’t come out of the store for feeling up the clerk.”

Resting a faint thumbs-up, he headed in towards the clothing store, following the instructions, he remembered on how to buy things. Just in case, Raymond and Haffel gently tailed off towards his direction. Praying and pleading that he wouldn’t be weird. There in the store, the lady handed him his bag. Unfortunately, she seemed to have gotten a tiny whiff of what a Frenchmen smells like. Revolting around silently. Once Bascone returned, Raymond mentioned.

“Dude, please. You can’t get women smelling… bad.”

Returning to the plaza after a quick forced shower, Bascone and his hulking frame was enhanced by not smelling like mud. Wearing the slacks of generic jeans and some tank top. Raymond started helping him adjust.

“Bascone, in order to start a conversation, you need an ice breaker. So, ask a woman here, anyone here about their day.”

Nodding his head, Bascone approached a blonde Anglo woman slouched to her side against some wall of a cafe.

As if waiting for someone. Raymond gave the go signal and he approached.

“Hey there madam. How’s you day going?”

“Yeah fine, got off work. Waiting for my…”

“Wanna shag?”

Raymond face palmed as Haffel rolled her eyes a hundred times. Pulling Bascone away, he scolded him.

“Why the fuck would you ask her that?” Look. Be nicer than that… man. Women aren’t toys.”

“Ok, ok fine Raymond.” Bascone nodded along.

By another table, Bascone spotted a black-haired beauty. From her hands, a visible vape shot out spirals of smoke like venomous oak. Her skin wore shades of tan. Almost that of a Greek woman. Minus the glamour of some white woven dress. Instead, a pretty pink top and rough jeans made her out to be some country girl.

“Hey woman… how’s your day been?”

“Fine… what do you want?”

“Would you… kindly like to shag?”

Resisting the urge to punch him in the back of the head. Raymond once more pulled Bascone by the ears.

Shaded by the willowed tree with plaza sashes strung up like Christmas lights. Remained a mysterious figure. She had all but clothed herself in early autumn wear. Brown coat for the early mornings, with a nice designer top complimenting underneath. Just in case Aussie weather hits and suddenly its 50 degrees. Beside her had been some radio. Tuning into all sorts of frequencies. Mainly police reports or local rumours of who locals perceive to be, people on crack. While read some newspaper. Skimming each page for info on local events, the image of Bascone presumably taken and posted on Facebook rested upon her lap. Another set of brown jeans. She had rotated between places. Spying across Sydney's heartland. Particularly, around the area of the infamous mall. And here, something picked up her attention with a thunderous decree.

"You know what!? Your advice on how to pick up women doesn't help me at all!" She watched a man in generic clothes shout. "Only a real woman would want me, Sir Bascone of Orleans. A knight crowned by…"

Hearing that name sent shockwaves, she had just finally struck gold.

"Shut up… all you're doing is drawing negative attention to yourself Bascone… come on man. Nobody,

trust me, nobody in their right mind would ever want a knight like you…"

From the side of the conversation however, a woman tripped over. Shouting in their direction, she said

"Help I need a handsome knight!"

Bascone headed towards her. Grasping at her hands, she was gently whisked off the floor. And into Bascone's embrace. Expecting him to once again failed, Raymond turned on a metatheoretical timer. Waiting for him to ask for a shag. But there, he did nothing. Just staring off into her dessert sands. As if, she unlocked a completely different side of him. The woman too, shared a distant stare. Preying off any protentional emotion. With a hushing whisper, blooming into a softer side of him. Bascone began to change before Raymond and Haffel's own eyes. The pair could see each galaxy shift and mould into something new. Captured in by a hailed big-bang.

"Well… hello there." Bascone uttered in a completely different tone. "Who would you might be?"

"Thanks for before… my name? Geez, I don't give my name out to pretty boys often. But I guess I ~*have* to make an exception."

Leaning outwards, she expressed such glee in his presence. Haffel couldn't believe it. So she gently torn back her hood. Hoping to get a closer look.

"The name's Valerin." She made clear. "And who might my hero be?"

"I'm Sir Bascone of Orleans." Bascone mentioned. "These here are my friends. Wit… Haffel and Raymond.

The others approached Valerin. Pleased to see that Bascone finally met his goal.

"Yeah, Bascone apparently he's a knight from France…"

"Haffel, what did I tell you?" Raymond turned to Haffel.

Valerin chuckled along naturally. Not believing in what Bascone was accused of being.

"Oh silly. Knights haven't been a thing for centuries."

"Not this one… although… the thought of everyone that I know being dead. It's not a happy one."

Valerin tried comforting him the best way she knew. Turning Bascone away from his despair, she said

"Would you consider a walk along the beach?"

Bascone smiled, then turned around to see Raymond and Haffel clasping at his success.

"Go on Bascone, make us proud." Raymond cheered on.

His and her soles planted deep within the sandy bason as the pair walked along a gracious patty. Losing the shoes, Valerin trenched barefoot. Bascone however, relented at the idea of removing his footing. Bonding as one would, they gently sailed across much of the coastline of sand. Bowing to nobody. Valerin masked anymore desires calmly and swiftly. Becoming able, and masterful of wooing Bascone in.

“Why did you take me here exactly?” Bascone requested to know.

“Well…”

Valerin planted lies within Bascone. Aiming to impress his seemingly shallow understanding.

“I was an excellent swimmer. Perhaps the best on my swim team.” She replied with a sly smirk. “I could swim long distances. That was a while ago though…”

“Sorry to inform you but, I hate the sea.” Bascone folded his hands, stopping his lovely walk.

“Why is that?” Valerin stopped and stared.

“The sea serves 2 purposes. To separate us from those filthy Anglos. And to dump their reckless bodies back into the sea.” Bascone replied.

Valerin chuckled a fake laugh before listening to what Bascone had to say.

“Bloody bows and their ships. They could just fock off, yet they refuse to leave our baren land. Each and every raid they unleash either scorches our villages or kill our people.”

“Yeah…”

“Unlike real men, you know, men who don’t use longbows for each and every single encounter.”

“Yes?”

“We can put up a good fight…”

Valerin continued nodding repeatedly. Almost like the bobbing heads of a figurine. Unable to stop his ranting about killing Englishmen to not blow her cover. Valerin took his hand, however, unexpectedly he hushed his tone.

“Enough of that… I…” Bascone huddled towards her banner.

Valerin wisped him by the hand. Leading him across the afternoon bay. There, Valerin pointed to the sky. Emitting vibrant red and orange echoes of abyss. The occasional seagull darkened into that of those seen within painting. Black gliding objects, pushing the air around them with a silent whistle. Clouds blended into

the express attitudes presented by the sun. All eyes were upon it. Like a figment of sunflower yellow. As the morning bugs fell asleep and the possums began to rise. The pair joined together to give one last goodbye to the afternoon sunset.

“It’s… so beautiful…” Bascone uttered, holding Valerin close.

“I agree.” Valerin silently fiddled. “You can’t say otherwise.”

They both forgot their problems for a while. And joined in silence.

Bored out of their minds. Haffel and Raymond waited for their arrival. Not used to seeing Bascone without his helmet. He was surprised when he witnessed Valerin’s masking spell actually making Bascone normal. Walking their way up the rampart, Haffel waved from the oak bench they sat upon.

“Hey Valerin and Bascone!” She yelled. “Up here!”

Valerin held Bascone back for a moment. He gently turned as she passed him a note.

“What’s this?” Bascone asked. “That’s a large number.”

“No you idiot.” Valerin played a laugh. “It’s my number. Just, you might need a phone to put it into.”

“I’ll ask my friend Raymond about it.” Bascone told her.

As Valerin’s figure disappeared into the sunset. Raymond became rather curious about something.

“Bascone… why aren’t you, you know… being… respectful with her?”

“Because she looks like me wife from back home.”

“You have a what?” Haffel and Raymond couldn’t believe it.

Chapter 9: The Playbook

Spread open blood eagle style, sat the newspapers upon newspapers of Raymond's drama assessment. He had been confused. Praying smacking 2 big stones together, would conjure an idea. Suddenly, Raymond heard footsteps. His head focused on Ryan whose port was slammed down below his legs, as he sat in the bench.

"What are you working on Raymond?" Ryan asked. "Is this one of your plays?"

"Well yeah… arts night is coming up fast. Yet I have no ideas."

The calling of Joseph and Henry drew near as Raymond looked up. He had been glad to see them. For they tend to light up the table in laughter.

"Why are you doing your assessment now?" Henry asked.

"Well… I have to. I feel pressured that if I don't get it done out of the way, I won't finish it." Raymond replied

"You should call it… booty crack micro penis…" Joseph joked with a chuckle.

Henry smirked as Raymond didn't feel like laughing. Instead, he opened a smile.

"Sorry but I can't do that…" Raymond awkwardly shuffled.

“What exactly do you want to do with it?” Ryan told him. “Make it on something you know.”

“Alright, I’ll try…” Raymond replied, happily.

From the far corner of his eye, Raymond witnessed the figures of Mike and Charlie, slowly drifting towards the bench. Mike became confused when he neared the table. Whereas Charlie’s eyebrows frowned. His feet stomped through marsh with an anguished demeanour. Tipping an object backwards and forwards between his hands. Raymond gasped. It was the same ball Raymond managed to uncover from the treehouse. Despite moving at a snail’s pace. Raymond readied himself. Witnessing the ground vibrate around Charlie.

“Somehow, we got the ball back…” Mike answered the fuss. “How did we get it though?”

A hard swallow pressed inside of Raymond’s throat as his eyes twisted apart. The table went dead quiet. Igniting a mystery among each of them.

“Well… I didn’t get the ball.” Joseph stared at Mike. “I don’t remember going up there.”

“Henry, did you go into that treehouse or get it?” Mike questioned him.

“Clearly not… why the fuck would I do that?”

Feeling a hot, scolding glare glisten against his skin. Raymond gazed down from Charlie's enraged pupils.

"I bet playboy over here did it!" Charlie shouted.

More of them began to observe Raymond as he raised his hands in fear.

"Guys… it's been months." Raymond defended himself. "I'm sure somebody found it in there. Considering how long the ball was in there since its discovery…"

"He could be right…" Ryan backed him up. "But Raymond… did you or did you not go up there?"

Knowing Raymond's nature, Ryan waited for a response.

"Raymond… we've told you the stories. She's cursed remember…"

Raymond's eyes felt blank as he got up from his seat. Gently extending his frame. He stood over his friends like a flimsy pool noodle.

"It was him everyone!" Charlie shouted whilst pointing.

"Come on guys… I… I just wanted to get the ball back."

Then, the shouting began. Raymond took the cries. Once more, standing along, morphing into a target range for them to shoot their anger towards.

“Guys calm down!” Raymond ordered, trying his best to bolster his defence. “Come on, surely she’s not cursed alright… to me she was just a kind and quiet girl…”

Ryan strode upwards as everyone soon stopped the shouting. Placing a warm, charming hand upon Raymond’s shoulder. He replies,

“Did you go up there only to get the ball?”

“Well… of course…” He responded with a snicker of fear.

“Promise us you never ever go up there again.” Mike demanded in excess.

“Alright I promise.” Raymond relentlessly apologises. “I… I’m sorry… so very sorry…”

“Good… hey guys. Now we have the ball back.” Ryan began. “Perhaps we should kick it around instead of sitting around doing nothing.”

Sat within the confines of what many would call a book infested church. The walls of marble and shelves as old as the Anglo Saxons. Surrounded by a mass in the library. His pen did more dribbling small doodles than actual productive scripture.

“What on earth do I call this… play anyways?”

So cryogenically frozen in thought, he had all but failed to notice his teacher slowly encroaching upon his turf.

“Raymond… how is your progress for this play going?”

He turned, just right enough to appear like a fly on the teacher’s glasses.

“I’m stuck on what to name it sir.” Raymond answered.

“Ever heard of writing and imagining the plot before naming it?” His smug reply vibrated. “Time is ticking Raymond…”

Sorrowfully disappointed, the man tied his hands within a bow before slowly walking away. Making sure to check on everyone else. With that bug like gaze. By the window, Raymond pondered. Unable to connect his story until he at least had some name.

“Come on… think…”

His thought process was sharply interrupted by the gliding of a nearby pigeon. At first, it was a nuisance until, he remembered.

“Wait… pigeon… Adam?”

Jotting down a bunch of draft like names, he landed upon one. Knowing exactly who might be able to fit the role.

“Woman of the 7 pigeons” Raymond wrote.

Approaching the treehouse, his back swiftly turned from side to side. Waving around his thick skull. Scanning for any of his friends. Thankfully, nobody came to sight, but the occasional oval tumble weed. Climbing into Haffel's chamber. He was met by the usual sight of her bucket hat, dragging her head from side to side from the width of the breeze.

"Hi Raymond." Haffel shook her hand.

"Haffel… I have a request. Would you like to be a part of my play?"

The second the word, play, was uttered. The shining beacons of light and dark halls full of laughers came to mind. Shivering her skin cold and clean.

Hiss!

Haffel's hands smother her face and eyes to his words.

"No… I refuse…" Haffel sharply utters.

"Come on… you can partake in the creative process with me if you want?" Raymond lends his hands out. "I'll help you and everything."

Moving her hands, she attempted to cast a spell by thrusting a burst of magic within Raymond's direction.

"Make Raymond go away." She casts the spell.

“Haffel… I’m still here.” Raymond responds. “Come one. It will be very much fun for the two of us. I have the plan here. We need pigeons. I want a female to play as Silo of Epin. She has an obsession with pigeons. With this I estimate four people will be needed. This will be very enjoyable.”

Haffel’s frown persisted as the duo stared off at one another.

“Please Haffel… I promise. It’s just a play… it will be fun…”

Munching down on her resistance with the elegance of an acid bath, Haffel’s gaze slanted downwards as Haffel replied,

“Fine… Raymond… just promise me it will be ok…”

Chapter 10: Take Me To Church!

By the will of pleasure, the pair of Bascone and Valerin made their mark upon a park bench in the early hours of said morning. As the worms began sprouting, for the early birds to swoop up. Valerin planted within her grasp a fine ice cream.

“This is great…” Valerin pressed up her glasses. “It’s cold already though…”

“I find this weather to be different back home. But it truly is wonderful that this carriage doesn’t move.”

Valerin laughed at his response.

“Bascone.” Valerin responded. “This isn’t a cart for horse riding. You just use it for sitting.”

“Then what are these?” Bascone turned to the side.

“You’re pointing at the bars on the benches.” Valerin folded her hands with a smirk. “It stops homeless people from sleeping on them.”

“Well, tell them to sleep on a hay stack or something.” Bascone uttered. “Used to do that back in France.”

“Days are different.” Valerin stared at the sky.

“Thanks for helping me strap my armour up. I appreciate it.” Bascone told Valerin.

“No problem.”

Valerin lays herself outwards, watching as the skyline slowly fill with the world's birds.

"Hey Valerin." Bascone asked of her kindly. "Care to attend church with me tomorrow?"

Glowing her eyes, as if putting on a side show. Her hands gravitated to her side with much glee.

"You must have many questions for God do you not?"

"Perhaps I do." Bascone cosied up to Valerin. "Like how I managed to find my wife again…"

He closed his face into that of Valerin's. She didn't have to worry; Raymond had been forcing him to take showers and brush his teeth. So, all Valerin could smell was the alluring scent of love.

"Wife? You… you're calling me your wife?"

Bascone held her hand, pushing Valerin onto him. His knightly armoured arms slowly collapsed onto Valerin. Gently pushing her into his chest.

"Thanks for coming into my life… I don't know when I will be able to see my old life again."

Valerin blushed, glad to be with him.

"If we attend church, I'll just have to say. There are more branches than… before…"

Waiting outside, both Bascone and Valerin had eyes plastered like sticky notes upon them. Everyone from old to young with their parents or alone. They waved, but not expecting some guy dressed in full gear to show up. Valerin stood beside her man. Holding his hand.

“Hey Bascone.” Valerin pointed. “That man over there is selling flowers.”

As elegant as they looked, the smell loomed towards their direction. Coated in an elixir of sweet texture. Bascone couldn’t help but to feel at ease. Despite him running from almost every car he saw.

“You love them?” Bascone replied to Valerin’s advance.

“It would be such a lovely thought to have them within a vase. Perhaps at my place.”

Listening to the noises of some sudden distant thudding, Valerin’s head spun to the palace of religious highlights. The building was of marble white. Designed to capture thoughts, prayers, and money from old people. By the foot of the stairs, a bishop bowed, symbolising his loyalty to his scripture. In a raspy, old and wise wizard tone he remarked,

“God’s day is with us… let us get down and holy.”

Bascone grasped Valerin by the hand. Guiding her up the stairs and upon a row of silver red carpet.

Once making a seat, Valerin was then reminded about Bascone's… you know…

"Hey mam." Bascone flirted with the woman beside him. "The name is Bascone… wanna shag?"

Forgetting what he can be like, it wasn't until he began tapping the legs of women, did she hold his hands down.

"Bascone…" Valerin laughed in shock. "You can't just…"

Once the women quietly migrated away from Bascone's grasp, the pair were once again alone.

"Why do you do… that?" Valerin quizzed him on his past.

"It's called flirting." He replied in an angsty teenager way.

Before their eyes, the gift box to the church came leering by. As the old folk began unboxing their vacuum cleaners to wisp up any and all dollars. Passed to him, he waited for a few moments as the old fold turned around.

Swipe!

In a moment of swift theft, Valerin could only watch as a hand of Bascone's latched onto a $50 note before pulling away.

"Bascone…" Valerin had no idea what to do. "What?"

"I'm to assume this is what is used to buy things, correct Valerin?"

"Well yes but why take it?"

"Other plans." Bascone filled in the gaps.

Leaving the steps, everyone was fair welled by the churchmen. Behind a bustling crowd of old people resembling the stair way to heaven. Bascone and Valerin treaded lightly. At the bottom of the steps, Bascone led Valerin towards the flower stand.

"Hello kind sir." Bascone opened up. "How many flowers will this amount buy?"

Shifting one eyebrow upwards, the man smiled.

"Looks like it's for your lady, correct?" He replied.

Valerin slowly loomed out of his grasp. Happy and gleefully awestruck, when she realised why he stole that money.

"Valerin, pick as you please."

“Oh… Bascone…” Valerin remained breathless. “You couldn’t have… you took that money… all for me?”

She grabbed out a bundle of roses. Matching her type of red glasses and lustful spells casted on Bascone daily.

“Just… these ones thanks.” Valerin turned a smiled at the seller.

“You are one lucky man. Careful… she’s a killer…” He chuckled as a joke.

Down the pebbled littered concrete, Valerin and Bascone rotated around a corner. Leading into some wide plaza like street. Outside what appeared to be a bar decorated by string lights which glowed a bright yellow. By now, the time was early, so no day drinkers came in and out of the normally rotating door. Beside a brick meadow, Valerin began to feel something was off. She stood priceless, unable to associate said touch within her stomach. To anything she had quite possibly experienced before. It started small, yet time ticked by, and the once small balloon began drifting inside of her.

“Hey… Bascone…” Valerin told Bascone. “I… don’t feel quite so well.”

Valerin scurried off, into some city porta pot placed out for doing anything but using the bathroom. Once inside, her head gagged below as she tried to vomit. However, the feeling subsided. Retracting into her mind. Poking

her head out from the stall, she spotted Bascone, patiently waiting for her with a hint of gladness.

“Hey over here!” Bascone waved.

Gently crossing over the bricked crossing. She felt better once more.

“Hey Bascone, I feel better.” Valerin took his hand. “I… don’t know what fell over me.”

Later that night, the 5-star motel’s gym was hit hard by Valerin’s ferocious training. Taking up boxing, she slammed three hits along the side of a boxing bag before backing up. Once more slamming the red pole to smithereens with one uppercut.

Slam!

Each punch feeling as powerful and as tough as her motives. Raising the gloves to her face, Valerin spiked the side of its bobbling frame one more time. Letting herself some rest.

“Shit… I need to get better.” Valerin thought to herself.

Moving over to her bench presses, a good 12 kg was able to be benched by her. Placing the weights on, a faint clanging of the metal followed. Laying down with the

elegance of a lion, Valerin's iron grip excelled in lifting the bar to her chest before up again.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Once 2 sets were completed, she slowly placed the bar up. Racing over to her phone. She saw who it was. The boss, Nercea.

"Hello there Valerin." Nercea spoke. "How do you like your motel?"

"Yeah, it's alright… Sydney is comparable to Melbourne in that respect."

"So tell me, how was your contact with Bascone? Found him yet?"

"Well yes, did you miss my text Nercea?"

Nercea's smile could be felt even through the glass of her phone.

"Peruse him in any way you need… but please, at least get to know the man and build trust with him." Nercea spoke with upmost pleasure.

"Can't we just kidnap him already?"

"The plan was that you can in the meanwhile, out of your budget, you can do whatever necessary. But by next year I shall have a plane set up to bring you and him here."

“Yes Nercea.” Valerin saluted him through the phone.

“Remember my dear, you are my toolbox… if you so dare fail, then you shall be disposed of. This is important after all…”

Valerin returns to her room, a nice apartment fit for a Queen such as herself. Offered in the living room was a fluffy couch with comfy pillows to rest upon. From the door, a hall connected her luxurious bedroom, complete with angel white bedding to keep her comforted during winter. Notable the most, the kitchen connecting a small yet beautiful scenery balcony. Taking to her knife, she perfectly sliced up sets of carrots, seasoners and all the like. Combining them into a beef stew. Yet… she felt somebody was missing.

“I… I should invite Bascone here someday… maybe I could kidnap him easier away from Haffel and Raymond.”

Grabbing her meal, she ate by the comfort of her movie theatre styled TV. However,

Swoop!

Valerin’s eyes twisted towards the window. Which presented a displaying image of what appeared to be, a pigeon. Painted in white and the occasional grey fur. The

bird observed her, drawn in by her cooking. Getting onto her slippers, Valerin pressed closer to the window. Now mere inches apart. She opened it.

Flutter!

Leaving her alone, the pigeon stormed off. Finding somewhere else to perch.

Chapter 11: Gone Clucky

Raymond slanted the bag down beside the couch of Haffel's living room. Happy to see Haffel decide to cosy from her shell. He brought along snacks. All of which were promptly eaten within minutes. Giving the demoralised Haffel a quick pep talk. Raymond described what was to be done.

"How would you feel… in a hood?" Raymond asked her.

"I mean, it would be… better." Haffel tilted her head. "Do I really have to?"

"Look Haffel if it pains you this much, you can leave the play... I'll just have to find another person but come on Haffel…"

Despite Raymond's request, however. She didn't move an inch.

"You're not going to leave this will you?" Raymond remarked in a pleading way. "It will be very fun Haffel."

"I suppose you're right. I did agree. I'm just worried." Haffel aimed her head downwards. "What if… I get made fun of?"

"Don't worry Haffel, it's just a high school play." Raymond placed a hand on her head. "Trust me, we'll do fine."

Having last minute renovations was out of the picture. When her mind couldn't stop, but to dwell upon her

imminent stage fright, Raymond said something else. Which caught her mind.

“Haffel… we need pigeons. About 7. Particularly ones that are trained and won’t shit everywhere.”

“Are you sure about pigeons?” Haffel looked up. “Oh, we should have some scary monster eat them.”

“No… that will not work.” Raymond replied. “We need birds that will go along with it and behave.”

Suddenly, he noticed enthusiasm pull up to the party. Haffel was ecstatic. Raymond knew he found gold despite trying to find copper.

“What about my chookies?” Haffel’s face lit up. “They are beautiful and well behaved.”

“Yeah… I wondered why this place sounded like a farm in the city.” Raymond turned to the window.

When Haffel continued giggling at the idea of her hens roaming around on stage. Bascone stumbled from the kitchen. Soon, Raymond’s simple-minded happiness quickly shattered. Because around Bascone’s eye, was a mark of purple. Ballooning upwards.

“Bascone… what the fuck did you do this time?” Raymond exited the couch.

“I just… fell over and at the same time coincidentally, a woman’s fist just landed square on me left eye.”

Facepalming at his stupid excuse. Raymond stood by as Haffel grabbed an ice pack.

Some shuttering pressed firmly into the old wooden door as they entered the yard. What should have been a vast yard, that, at least someone could punt a ball in. Was one gigantic chicken coop. Poles of a termite resistant wood housed layers of wire. Beneath the string of fence was what Haffel named, her chookies. She had like… a lot. Below their feet was a vibrant see of mud from last night’s storm. And hardened soil from the bushfire it put out. The village, if you could call it that. Had at least 10 chickens vying to see who can be the loudest. Many lined up at the gate. Gleefully bobbing their heads up and down. Pleased to see who feeds them appear in sight.

“These are my chookies.” Haffel opened the pen.

Once inside with her chook shoes on. Haffel raised one off the floor. Descending them to heaven. By the width of her arms.

“Look at them. They are beautiful.” Haffel cuddled it like a stuffed animal.

“Ahh… Haffel.” Raymond pointed out. “I’m pretty sure you’re breaking zoning laws…”

“Zooming laws?” She responded happily ignorantly. “No that’s for cars idiot.”

“No, it’s…” Raymond stopped.

Bascone’s curious gaze had tilted towards the side as he witnessed one of her so-called, chookies. But outside the pen. It rested within her garden bed. However, something was rightfully off. The fiend sported striking red colours which hashed over into a blondish white. Feeling its eyes locked onto Bascone’s metal armour. The rooster began raising its fish back comb. Chittering with a humming beak.

“Haffel… what’s that thing over there?” Bascone noted.

Studying the 2 others which arrived within Haffel’s yard. It didn’t flinch away. But remained like a revving engine.

“Oh… him. He doesn’t want to come back into the coop. Because… he’s the biggest… meanest chookie of them all…”

Fixing up a prebuilt smirk. Bascone unslung his metallic blade.

“Finally… a worthy opponent!” Bascone raised his blade.

“Bascone!” Raymond shouted. “Stop!”

Slowly pressing an encroaching march upon the rooster’s turf. It remained frozen, raising a hushing crow at Bascone’s feet.

“Time to meet your end beast!”

Bascone raised his blade as Raymond and Haffel watched in horror. But that was until… it raised its talons and with one kick, sent Bascone tumbling back.

Ahh!

Bascone fled backwards, defeated in his first engagement.

“Oh, you devilish hound!” Bascone cried. “You want more do ya!?”

Raymond and Haffel watched for 10 minutes straight. All in dismay over Bascone’s fleeting attempts at quote on quote, slaying the beast. Bascone would run up repeatedly. Just to be pushed back again by the force of… rooster foot. Each and every time, Bascone fled backwards.

“Wait… I could have sworn he… was a knight?” Raymond remarked.

“A… knight you say?” Haffel couldn’t believe her eyes.

Soon enough, the rooster had a gut full. During one time Bascone fled back behind friendly lines. The beast pounced upon his spine. Smacking its beak against his armour like a chook to food on the ground. Each clank causing Bascone to carry on.

“What a knight? Am I right Haffel?”

Haffel wasn’t too happy after Raymond’s words. She opened the pen up. Approaching the rooster, she tapped it off Bascone’s back. As Bascone took to her hand, he said,

“Oh, great heavens… the almighty Haffel saved me.”

“Leave him alone Bascone…” She loudly hushed.

On with her baking gloves. Haffel’s star brownie mix was being carefully assorted into her glass bowl. The chocolate pudding-like mixture placed a happy smile on both Haffel and Raymond’s face. Pleased by the smell upon it entering the living room. Bascone watched Haffel open and close the oven. Pondering in deep thought. When the brownies exited the baking lodge. The demon and angel returned.

“Yummy… brownies… we should invite Valerin over and…” the angel was interrupted.

“Put that rooster in that furnace…”

“Say no less…” Bascone uttered.

Facing his back towards Haffel, he had managed to snag the rooster and nest it between his arms. Covering the thing’s beak and wings with his fingers.

“Hey Haffel…may I put a roast on?”

“Yeah sure… go right ahead…”

Once he however, went to open the oven…

Bock! Bock!

Haffel turned around swiftly.

“Ah… it’s a… live… one?” Bascone deflected.

“No!” Haffel shouted. “Put him outside!”

Bascone dropped the rooster upon the floor. Scuttering along the kitchen tiles for a while. It soon found the door. Retreating back to its favourite resting spot.

“What were you going to do?” Haffel asked him.

“He ruined my honour.” Bascone sighed. “How do you think Valerin would feel if she heard I lost a fight against a mere rooster?”

Bringing Bascone to a place he would see as familiar. A tavern, Valerin and Bascone sat alone. Upon a far table.

Deciding to be the backup driver, Valerin shook away the wine in favour of grape juice.

“I’m so sorry Valerin… but I must confess that I may have lost a fight against a rooster.”

“Oh, how dare you be so weak.” Valerin scolded him. “You have disappointed your maiden. “

Bascone clasped her hands in a desperate plea.

“Please, I beg of you… forgive me.”

Valerin folded her hands, staring away from Bascone until his pleas couldn’t go unheard.

“Well fine… but… if you wish to gain back my honours. You will drink this fine wine.”

Valerin took a bottle of wine, shifting it into the confines of a glass before sneaking a roofie. While Bascone became too busy, eating an entire roast chicken like a barbarian. She pressed it towards his hands.

“Won’t my precious dear knight of Orleans so graciously indulge himself into my drink?” Valerin spoke so heavenly.

Bascone raised the cup to his face slowly. Bringing a smile to Valerin’s preying eyes.

“Come on… come on… drink it…” Valerin schemed.

Then, Bascone halted. To Valerin's annoyance. For his eyes had landed on a prize only he could truly lust after. Bascone raised his stance from the chair. And in true horror. Valerin could only watch as he began chatting up other women. There, a blonde. Half down the rabbit hole of all sorts of drinks.

"Hey there darling." Bascone shared a toast. "Want this drink of mine?"

"Sure…" she stuttered.

Taking a swig, he began chatting her up in Bascone fashion.

"So… wanna shag?"

After ten seconds flashed by, her eyes began to fade.

Thud!

Bascone was stuck in utter confusion. Not realising the woman, didn't just randomly fall asleep.

"Well… she didn't say no so…"

Aborting the mission faster than a teenage mother does her own kids, Valerin swiftly anchored a hand around Bascone's side. Drawing him away from the blonde. Valerin calmly exited, with Bascone entering the front of her car.

Dead asleep. The night flashed guiding lights and a shy winters breeze. Valerin's eyes landed onto Bascone. Drifting off, he perhaps was having dreams of great conquests. Women, and the occasional Englishmen being slaughtered. At a stoplight, she herself debated on what to do.

"He's in my car…" Valerin remembered. "I can kidnap him."

But as she indicated to the side, Valerin paused and reflected. Her mind kept telling her arms to swerve towards her motel. But yet, a force held her down. Turning her head one more time, she saw Bascone slightly wake up.

"Tonight was amazing Valerin." Bascone's hand landed onto her thigh. "I really enjoyed it."

Like a jolt of energy. Valerin turned her indicator off. Heading to Raymond's house instead.

"N… no… maybe not today."

Chapter 12: Best Friends Forever

Listening to the glamour of loud music. The children's casino, otherwise called a bowling alley played all sorts of hits from the 2000's. Standing upon carpet mimicking the colourful designs of bus seats. Raymond's eyes were drawn into the impressive colours. Walking down to the arcade section of the bowling alley brought him and Ryan such joy. Taking a liking to a particular pinball machine, Raymond plopped a fine coin in before hatching the ball with a powerful pull back. Watching the metal rocket twist and turn, it reminded him of Bascone.

"Couldn't remember this machine being this fast…" Raymond scurried to himself.

Slamming his hand furiously on the buttons like Hitler from the movie downfall. Falling down screaming, the ball skirted off the main road as Raymond timed a perfect bounce. Zipping through an alley, lights and fireworks off within his eyes.

"10,000 points!" The pinball machine displayed.

Taking a detour, Raymond once more gleamed a perfect shot. So much so, a familiar face of joy arrived.

"Great skills Raymond." Ryan greeted him. "Wanna watch me play that shooting game?"

Waiting for the ball to stall down into the pit of the dispenser box. Begging for Raymond to put another quarter in. He sailed around to the other block.

“I need to warn you; I don’t go so easy on em…” Ryan made clear.

The game soon began, Raymond watched in pure amazement. No animal was safe. Behind a tree, his character would seemingly find a way to blow the bark away. Spotting an alley of ducks, Ryan’s hands motioned several strokes. By the end, all but one fell down below. He was PETA’s worst nightmare.

“Shit mate you got skill.” Raymond remarked.

“Still got some more.” Ryan pointed to the screen.

Charging across the screen, a huge hulking beast forwarded from the bush. Attacking the player. Catching two of his rounds before the bull was in sight. Ryan unloaded three pieces of lead.

“Damn… that reaction time.” Raymond high-fived Ryan’s grip.

Joseph and Henry hopped off the racing game after crashing all their cars. Looming over drunk out of their mind. The pair smiled.

“Sup.” Henry spoke up. “Wanna play that basketball game?”

He pointed over towards the corner. And it was perfect time. Being a popular game, the kids and tryhards

always would flex their muscles. By now, they had vanished as the night continued.

“I need to shit!” Joseph loudly announced. Expecting a laugh.

“Ok!” Henry twirled. “Enjoy it!”

Straying his hands onto the grip of a basketball, Raymond waited. Whilst Henry gently dribbled it onto the floor. As it began, Raymond fired up with a swirling shot. Unfortunately, it vanished by the wayside.

“Shit…”

Raymond picked up another, unleashing a careful shot that went in. By the next shot, Henry’s ball bounced off Raymond’s, landing by the side.

“Keep it that way dickhead.” Henry giggled in sync.

It was about a good few minutes until Henry’s phone buzzed. Raymond noticed Henry dig through his pocket. So, taking the chance, he continued scoring. But with one glare of his face. He knew what he was laughing at.

“This fucker…” Henry showed Raymond.

Mr president, another ass pic just hit the phone screen. Anyways, Raymond awkwardly smiled before turning away.

“I don’t get you guys sometimes…” He replied in an embarrassed, laughable state. “Maybe it should be on times magazine.”

Ryan approached the group. Noticing the game was all but wrapped up, he tapped beside Raymond.

“Care to get a game of that shooter?” Ryan asked him.

Cracking his knuckles, he remarks,

“Sure… but I’ve never played that game before.”

Ryan placed the gun within Raymond’s grasp. As he held it like a child holding a Barret 50 cal. Raymond slowly spun towards the screen. Placing a coin into the slot, the screen lit up, alluring his eyes to the prospect of hunting. Moving the blinking flicker of a selector, he chose a safari map from Ryan’s suggestion.

“You ready Raymond?” Ryan spoke to him like a child.

“Y… yes…” he replied.

Throwing up a couple bucks and a silver lion, his hands twisted. The textures shifted across his screen as he failed to shoot one. Ryan stood back, letting him try over and over again. Upon dashing past a cave, one mean lion with ‘shoot me all you want’ tattooed on its teeth came crawling.

“Die stupid lion.” Raymond spat.

Landing only a single shot. The lion charged his character. Killing him instantly.

“You’re playing this wrong.” Ryan uttered.

Grabbing the gun from his grasp. Ryan steadied his aim. Letting Raymond watch him.

“See? Use your dominant eye. You’re way too sporadic. Try slowing your aim.”

Judging by the fact that if it had been a real gun, the entire place would be riddled with bullets. Raymond was once again handed his gun.

“Ok… I’ll try.” Raymond explained. “Sorry I just never knew how to shoot these things.”

Restarting the match, instead choosing an Antarctic map.

“Make sure to not shoot the penguins.” Ryan let him go.

Moving across the plain, Raymond saved one of the business pigeons from the jaws of a seal. Pumping the beast slowly full of lead. Moving to the side, a polar bear roared towards his direction. Watching the penguins gently wade out of the way, his buckshot bounced twice off the ice before Raymond landed a shot into the bear’s skull.

“You’re getting better.” Ryan remarked.

Suddenly, the penguins however picked up RPGs. finding them in some army depo. Shooting back at them, Raymond took out a few of those birds.

“Whoops… forgot they did that.” Ryan laughed.

By the end, Raymond was victorious. Ignoring the logistics of penguins knowing how to man RPGs, Raymond high-fived his mate.

“You did it.” Ryan cheered.

Taking his 50 tickets. He approached the stand to buy some prize. Thinking about someone in particular, he picked out a love heart holding bear.

“What’s that for?” Ryan asked him.

“It’s… a present for mom…”

Receding towards the bowling floor. Mike and Henry were squabbling over who could out mog the other. Raymond turned and saw the score wasn’t even close. Mike had a massive lead ahead of Henry. This isn’t a maths question so, don’t worry about the numbers and generic names. Flexing his bro muscles, Henry leaned onto his skinny arms before throwing the ball down the lane. Having only 5 pins left, he swept them completely.

“Try beating that!” Henry announced.

On Mike's go. He fired down the alley one powerful strike. Going so fast, it had no time to swerve. It just shot out straight. As the pins screamed, begging to have a break. Mike's ball slammed into the first one it saw. Taking out a family of, used to be 10 pins. Flashing on screen. Mike turned to Henry.

"Oh yeah!" He cheered. "Get on this dick Henry!"

Joseph approached the gang in full Nikes. Hiding his vape within his pocket, he asks,

"What about another game since we're all here?"

"Winners go first." Mike announced, putting his name first.

"I'll go next, put me in." Joseph replied frantically happy.

"Henry can go next so I can shit on him." Mike stated, typing out his name.

Ryan points to Raymond. Whilst laying on the couch like a stoner.

"You go next mate." Ryan spoke. "I'll go last in order."

As the music disco began to spin, Mike rolled first. Flinging the ball down lane it bobbled around until landing into the centre. Knocking all but 3. By his second bowl, they were gone too.

“Impressive skill.” Raymond nodded.

“Not as much as this guy!” Mike’s voice dropped lower, pointing to Joseph.

Joseph grabbed the ball. Stumbling closer to the lane he shook his ass before launching the ball. Crazy for him, it worked like a rain dance.

Strike!

He walked back, acting stupid as always until sitting down. Henry awoke next. Getting close to the mouth of the river bowling. His hands strayed backwards before flip flopping down onto the smooth wood.

Miss!

Henry laughs whilst the ball took a detour. And like your stepdad drunk driving. It swerved off the road. Taking another go. He took down 5.

Raymond picked up the next ball. Having some clue how to play. Before he can fling one down lane…

“This stupid game!” A familiar voice called.

Knowing who was behind the knight’s helmet. His friend hanging out with Valerin ran down lane. Slamming his leg into the pins. He made himself the bowling ball.

“Who’s that cunt?” Mike asked.

Raymond bowled. Forgetting he existed.

Late into the night, Raymond remembered where Haffel's place was. To his surprise, Haffel met him by the door 12 in the night. Holding within her hand a monster, she greeted him surprised.

"Hi Raymond…" Haffel yawned. "Why are you here?"

He presented the teddy he won to her with a smile. Upon seeing the pink heart, she blushed.

"You… where did you get this?" Haffel asked.

"I won it at the bowling alley." Raymond remarked. "I knew you liked cute things, so I got it for you."

Absorbed into the face, she brought it up to her eyes. Snuggling its cold, brown fur. A frozen breeze flowed through her hair. Shivering Raymond despite the jumper.

"It's dangerous around here at night." She explained. "You can stay over here for the night."

Entering her room, Raymond couldn't help but to get a whiff of the aroma. Mixing some cuddling vanilla and a tint of rose. Her room lit up with a sort of beauty only women can understand. Sitting himself onto her clean bed,

"Hey Raymond." Haffel told him. "Stay there…"

Raymond yawns, almost ready for bed, when she comes back into the room. As he laid down, Haffel approached his lap. Laying onto his lap like a cat would some random bag on the floor. She presented him something.

“Wanna play Sonic Adventures?” She showed him her copy.

“Wow… that game is ancient. But… sure…”

Chapter 13: No Not That Number

Blowing through the curtains of Haffel's barred window. The wind graciously awoke Raymond holding Haffel close. Burning brighter than the sun were his eyes. Peeling back the layer of silt from his vision. A tired, yet not fully awoken Raymond, let go of Haffel. He looked down to see her. Plainly adrift in sleep. Upon shaking her body her reanimated corpse gently shrugged a slight yawn.

Yawn!

Sniffling out the dust from her nose. Her baggy eyes lifted.

"Morning Haffel…" Raymond yawned.

She curled up into a ball. Holding tight her pillow which grazed against her face.

"What day is it?" Raymond forgot, leaning out of bed.

Haffel twisted over. Observing Raymond shiver from the morning frost.

"It's school, isn't it?" Haffel groaned. "Monday? I had way too many energy drinks."

As the fatal insomnia wore off. Raymond's eyes shifted in a panic.

"Shit… I'm going to be late…"

“Too late already…” Haffel pointed at the clock. “It’s 10:34 am already.”

“Fuck… I stayed up late last night. Mom’s going to be worried…”

He checked his phone and thankfully, no notifications were present.

“We could work on your play at your place.” Haffel sparked an idea. “I’ll walk with you.”

Early winds carried to life the dandelions. Floating the spindles of woos. Walking across the concrete, both Haffel and Raymond approached a figure Raymond remembers from passing by. Adam looked upwards towards Raymond.

“Hey Raymond.” Adam waved. “Seems like you found somebody.”

Staring completely dumbfounded. His head emptied, almost filtering blank remembering his run in with him many times.

“Who even are you?” Raymond asked, holding Haffel’s hand.

“I’m Adam, remember?”

Being confused, Haffel tilted her head. Creating spirals between her pupils.

“Don’t worry… nothing to fear.” Adam released himself from a squat. “Others may be interested in meeting you two.”

As they were going to head off. A robed lady came straying towards the pair. Within her vibrant coat. What was pressed into her chest was that of a meowing cat. Before Haffel could hiss, she begins to be absorbed into the feline. Just like Raymond’s,

“Awe it’s so cute…” Haffel patted the kitty.

Raymond turned to Adam. Looking towards him, he gives Raymond a smirk.

“You trust us now?”

“Ye… yeah…” Raymond replied with a flavour of looseness.

“Would you two love to be painted together?” The robed woman asked.

“I wanna pat the kitty though…” Haffel said.

“You can hold her whilst I paint you guys.”

By the limelight of midday, the pair united by a set of stools. Laying the cat within her grasp, Haffel placed it within her lap. Soon, the lady unpacked her canvas with all the paints her commissions could buy. Each stroke painted what figments or cameras could only ever dream about imaging. Placed within the high clouds, her mind was at ease. Whilst painting, her smile elongated. Staring back at the two, Haffel couldn't remain as still as needed.

"I crave sugar…" Haffel impatiently implied.

"Calm down Haffel, I'm sure she'll be done soon." Raymond remarked.

Cratering the cat like a baby, it soon stood up. Leaping out of her lap, Haffel walked towards the cat before wisping it into her hands once more.

"Haffel." Raymond felt slightly annoyed. "You need to hold still."

"But the kitty tried to run away."

By the end, the robed lady turned the rotating canvas around. Exonerated by the depiction of real life upon the artistic mind. Raymond's gasp enveloped both him and Haffel. Whilst sparkles shot out from Haffel's pure eyes. Both blown away. Drawn partly real, partly fictitious.

"It's amazing…" Raymond reacted in glee. "Absolutely stunning."

“Wow that’s… stunning.” Haffel also spoke.

“My question is, now which one of you would like to take it?”

Taking a $20 from his pocket. Raymond handed her the cash before taking the painting.

“Hey Haffel.” Raymond told her. “I want you to take this.”

Feeling a stunning desire filtering her thoughts. Haffel turned her head. In a bliss of pure thankfulness. She exclaimed.

“Nobody… has showed me… this much care…”

Crawling back into her coat. A smile expressed gratitude.

“Haffel, thanks. And thanks for your help recently…”

Deep into snacks; whilst humming to herself. Both Raymond and Haffel enjoyed a comfort within his home. Coming up with ideas, the pair spindled their brains with pencils and markers. Knowing it didn’t need to be the best. But instead, it just had to get a passing mark. In the kitchen. Bascone could be heard whistling to himself. While making toast.

“Haffel… I think we could use your chickens.” Raymond brought up. “Pigeons would be too… you know… they’ll fly everywhere.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Her smile gleamed across his face. “Just… do I really have to be the main character?”

“We said you’ll be, remember?”

“But I…”

Haffel rested beside Raymond silently. Unable to extinguish her worry. Unlike her however, Bascone had… other issues…

“How do I take this fucking toast out!?” Bascone screams from the kitchen loudly.

Haffel suddenly strays an eye up at Raymond. Followed by a smug expression.

“You have to use a fork!” Haffel exclaimed back.

“Wait no you…”

Zap!

Ahh!

A massive flair of sparks erupt briefly from the toaster, as Bascone is sent backwards. As a crash of metal from his armour echoes. Raymond looks back at Haffel.

“The fuck did you do that for?” He asked her.

“Revenge.” Haffel smugly answered.

By the end of the night, Haffel was helping Jodie make a delightful dinner. Complete with a roast. By the bench side, their platter began to be decorated such like a Christmas trees. Raymond meanwhile sat alongside Bascone who was deep into his bible reading. He flickered a page, as Raymond was forced to listen to the sweltering sheet.

“Ever thought maybe taking the helmet off may make reading easier?” Raymond pondered to him.

“Nonsense.” Bascone replied. “I may need it if that witch over there casts a spell.”

“That’s not…”

Raymond scuffled down a sigh. Thinking Bascone hadn’t learned anything.

“How has your day been Bascone?” Raymond struck up a conversation, breaking the seal of open air.

“Not much happened. After having that electric spell casted, flung me through several buildings.”

“She didn’t do anything.” Raymond pressed his hands close to his face. “Haffel just tricked you into putting a fork in the toaster.”

Something came knocking suddenly as Raymond and Bascone's heads uprooted. Looming towards the doorway, Raymond was greeted by Valerin's beautiful scarlet dress. Bascone leaped from the chair. Approaching Valerin with his hand. Her face was like a silver carpet. Dazzling fixed makeup coated everything from her forehead to her eyes. Each blink fluttered so elegant. Made of silicone and a pure incense of alluring desire. With one finger she drew Bascone in.

"Wow… Valerin…" Raymond couldn't help but to notice. "This… this isn't a ball it's…"

"A daring and beautiful woman for Bascone." Bascone tailed his hands onto her. "Must look this ~*stunning*."

Valerin blushed with a sparkled, muffled laugh. Jodie turned to see Valerin. Confused as to if she came home from prom.

"Oh wow… who would you might be?" Jodie asked with a smile.

"The name is Valerin… I'm Bascone's *partner*…"

"Oh, that's a red rocket." Bascone uttered, lazing down on the seat.

Haffel even noticed with an impressed expression.

After she settled in, listening to Bascone read the bible as she applauded him. A linen hand stretched across his shoulder.

“Hey Bascone…” Valerin placed sudden urgency. “We… need to go outside.”

Once within the darkness of the setting backyard. Valerin erected a specific rosy-red Japanese fan across her smirk.

“A little birdy told me you may have some… scrolls…”

He remained puzzled, however. No matter how much she pushed.

“Excuse me?” Bascone stumbled. “Sorry dear but… I may be a bit drunk.”

“Drunk already? But there was no…”

“Let’s just say… Jodie didn’t lock the cooler… just a bit of pre-drinking.” Bascone mumbled, appearing smashed.

Valerin could sense the resemblance of alcohol oozing from his lips. With the shambling of his legs acting as noodle soup. She stood there, trying to pry more.

“Come on Bascone… tell me. Where did you place…”

Raymond opened the glass door, leading onto the patio. Interrupting their moment with a sheering squeeze of the rollers.

“Hey dinner is ready you guys.” Raymond called. “Bascone… no flicking food at Haffel.”

Upon placing the mask of bliss and flirtatious demeanour back on. Underneath bubbled a decerned anger. But as Bascone stumbled to the door. She helped. By the side of the table. Valerin joined in the feast of one big chicken. Grown in a genetics lab and approved by the world economic forums.

“So, Raymond… how’s the play going?” Jodie’s harmonious voice echoed.

“It’s going better than expected.” Raymond remarked close to Bascone. “We might end up using chickens as pigeons.”

Jodie smiled, hiding a laugh behind the food. Valerin chuckled along naturally. Drinking a sip of wine whilst hiding behind her fan. Acting as a princess.

“That is so adorable…” Valerin put on a posh voice.

She honed closer towards Bascone. Holding his hip. He expressed his gratitude back with an extra pour of wine.

“Enjoy God’s blood.” He made clear.

“Have you enjoyed your stay here?” Jodie turned to Bascone. “You’ve been really helpful with the washing.”

Bascone, drunk out of his mind, could only plaster on a smudging wiggle of a smile.

“I… agree…”

Chapter 14: How Many Attempts?

Joined in Sydney's most illustrious coffee shop according to Valerin. Including a suspiciously large back alley. Bascone's morning head spun wildly. Complaining about the pain. His so-called girlfriend cuddled and comforted him by the sofa. Grasping a tiny sip, the sugar infused coffee jolted his nervous system. Turning it into the confident system.

"Thanks for the shout." Bascone said.

"No problem… although you're in my debt…"

Valerin gently siphoned her hand against the width of his shoulder.

"You have to tell me about… what the birdy told me about last night."

Trying to remember. He replied,

"Well, if the bird told you, how would I know? Plus, birds don't talk… unless it's a witch…"

Rolling her eyes, she let go. Clamping down her glasses, she bent downward. Resting her hand upon something under the coffee table.

"Hey Bascone." Valerin asked of him. "Care to follow me? I have something to show you."

Leading him out with the sweet scent of her perfume. She directed him down into the alleyway.

“By the way… it’s secret. So, you need to wear this.”

Shifting a black bag across his head. Bascone became blindfolded as his helmet clouded against the width of the bag.

“My dearest Valerin. How secret is this?”

Suddenly, he felt Valerin’s suffocating snuggles hit his back, like a gracious grape vine. Slowly but surely, engulfing him in desire and comfort.

“Very secret… don’t you tell anyone.” She whispered to him, before a red, rosy kiss.

Ahead of him were security ready to successfully capture Bascone and bring him back to Nercea. 2 Men apart of the operation noticed them from afar. Watching as Valerin gently closed the gap between them, and the blacked-out van. That was however… until.

“What the actual fuck?” Valerin’s brain fell out of her skull.

A man wearing farmer’s haystack headgear lured hundreds of goats to and across the alley. Valerin stood there in pure madness. She was about 50 metres away when the goat’s hurling began to be heard in full detail.

Leering an ugly eye. The man led them across the alley. By the time the last one vanished. Valerin continued.

"Surely that's it." Valerin imagined. "No more distractions. Just… a few metres away."

Bascone suddenly cramped up his crotch. Feeling an immediate need to piss.

"Crap Valerin." He uttered. "I need to piss."

Seeing she had time, Valerin allowed it. Unzipping his pants swiftly.

"Wow… only me old wife back home would do that." He blushed frantically.

She waited in silence for him to finish. Listening to the gushing waves. Bascone removed the bag.

"I… I can't breathe through this bag." Bascone remarked.

"But you need to…" Valerin stopped.

"Me sword!" Bascone quickly zipped up. "I… I left it back in the cafe!"

Valerin, raising her anger, let him go. He swiftly ran from the alley. Arriving at the cafe in a ruckus. Thrashing her tongue and feet. She yelped,

"Surely it's not this hard…"

Smash!

Valerin suddenly jumped. Turning around, her pupils dilated in a vast, anguished horror. The security jumped out of the way. Surviving what appeared to have been a fucking piano dropped right onto the van. Looking up at the sky, an older babushka lady seemed distraught.

“Me bad…” She uttered from all the way up there.

“I’m back Valerin I found…”

About to snap more than a twig. Her ruby red heels shredded a hole through the fabric of reality.

“Oh ah… Bascone…” Valerin turned around, putting on a fake smile, and a giggle. “You so missed it…”

Later, Bascone with Valerin and Raymond decided to enjoy a walk together. Not knowing what Haffel was doing. Perhaps she was brewing potions. Their spindly path exerted through an open-ended forest. Straight into a children’s park. Gushing afternoon winds, and an irradiated sun followed.

“Today was so beautiful…” Valerin tugged Bascone’s hand. “Wasn’t it?”

“I haven’t seen the surprise yet.” Bascone remarked in a preposterously nagging tone.

“What surprise?”

Raymond watched as Valerin retracted back. Coming up with an idea.

“It’s between me and him.” Valerin put up a defence. “Sorry… woman’s secret.”

Moving towards an open bench. Bascone and Valerin fell to the relaxation. Flustering the hair molecules of Valerin. Bascone took his time to gently neaten up her hair.

“I need to go to the toilet.” Raymond ran off.

Taking advantage of this opportunity. And the fact Bascone was in normal clothes. She swiftly unholstered a pair of handcuffs. Trapping him down smoothly, Valerin’s grin began to fluster.

“Tell me Bascone… you’ve had these scrolls, correct?” She asked him. “The ones you stole before you came here? Tell me, where you put them?”

Taking her fingers, she began the tickle torture method. His laughter soon blossomed into begging and pleading. Bascone’s hand tried freeing himself. But he couldn’t move.

“Shit… ahh shit Valerin…” Bascone realised he was stuck. “You got me at the wrong time.”

Her pleading grew louder. But Bascone remained none the wiser. Until he moaned,

“You’re so silly to me…” Bascone’s other arm reached over to her. “I love it… all your games.”

Her blush was seen for miles once the engine froze over. Unlatching the handcuffs just in time. Raymond approached the couple.

“Having fun?” Raymond asked.

“Ye… yeah…” Valerin’s soft voice arose.

Snapping out of her daze. Valerin’s extended hand cupped Bascone’s. Leering him away by the finger. She waved at Raymond.

“Hey Raymond.” She waved, alluringly. “Thanks for coming with us. We’re heading off now.”

Wishing them fair well, Raymond breathed a sigh of relief. His legs relaxed. However, instead of approaching the car, where she drove them, she strayed a path behind the toilet.

“Oh… they going to the toilet.” Raymond thought at first. “Wait…”

Valerin still had Bascone by the hands. Her head turned side to side. From afar, they braced for the forest… Embarking on a suspicious path. Raising an eyebrow.

Raymond quickly hurried, trekking not too close from Valerin and Bascone.

"Ok… just… no funny business. I can understand the toilet but… the forest?" Raymond gestured to himself.

Poking from the tree line. The willows of wood penetrated deep within the fog of grass. Occasional, openings of dirt seeped with critters. Worm, and every now and again, some slithering snake. Stepping through the marsh, Valerin had Bascone by the hand. Leading him out front like a prince to his princess.

"Where are you taking me?" Bascone asked kindly.

"Just my ~*Favourite* spot."

Raymond hid behind a tree as an opening engaged within the centre of the bush. Gushing open with the larping of a tunnel to the middle of the earth. A pit. Raymond couldn't see the bottom. But from the side, within the grass. A silver shovel was noticed.

"Just stand right there…"

Slowly shifting him into place. Raymond noticed a slivering out smile. One which turned to Valerin. She tugged him by the back. But before being able to push him. Her arms become noodles.

“Wh… why? I… why can’t I Push?”

Communicating to her nerves. They came back unread. Bascone twirled around. Holding Valerin tight, he landed a big, smooth kiss.

“This has been a wonderful walk, Valerin.” Bascone leered a frankly heartfelt beat. “We should do this more often.”

Raymond, taking the initiative, quipped into shape. Emerging from the brush.

“Hey… what are you 2 doing anyways?”

Valerin quivered her head in upmost horror. Holding Bascone, she muttered

“Just… going for a walk Raymond.”

“What’s with the shovel? And… the hole?”

Valerin, aiming to make any excuse she could. Slanted side to side. Looking through the trees.

“We were going bird watching Raymond…” Valerin came up with the excuse on the spot.

“You’re… not going to see many birds here?”

Raymond couldn’t shake it off. The shovel, the hole, Bascone wrapped around her fingers.

“We could go bird watching if you’d like.” Raymond signalled to them.

“That would be great.” Valerin approached Raymond with Bascone. “I was hoping we could see some crows or hawks.”

“Come with me.” Raymond turned around as the pair followed. “I can take you to the nature bird park.”

Laying on top her fancy bed. Valerin answered her call from big man upstairs.

“So, Valerin… how’s your progress been going? Have you taken my advice?”

Valerin’s eyes rolled for a moment before returning to the screen.

“Yes… I must say I’ve made lots of progress. But he’s… tricky.”

“What?” Nercea replied with a quipping ‘what’. “The fuck do you mean tricky?”

“He… he’s fairly… dangerous… like a… Frenchmen.”

“I mean he’s a knight from the 1400’s. I suppose He would try and kill everything in sight and be extremely dangerous…”

Valerin's head dropped like a bowling ball. Remembering everything Bascone had done.

"Ye… yeah totally he's fairly dangerous…"

"Just keep trying. Remember Valerin. You are my… toolbox…"

Rolling over onto the side, she was surprised to hear

"Sorry my dear Valerin… but we are incurring some budget restrictions. We will have to relocate you into a slightly cheaper motel. Unless you yourself are happy in paying for this motel's monthly fee."

Sighing, she agreed. Having no resistance left for the day.

"As for the plane idea, I want this dangerous monster tamed ASAP!!! Either that or beat the scrolls out of him. I'm still thinking next year will do the trick but, don't let him be known to the public… or else the History channel will come knocking…"

Nercea hung up, leaving Valerin dwelling consciously in her built-up, conflicting feelings.

"Wh… what should I do?" Valerin rolled into bed. "Tonight is my final night in this motel."

Chapter 15: Lion’s Gateway

Their voices hushed whilst he himself entered the elevator's chamber. Standing up firm like better call Saul, his stance or motives were unclear. But it smothered the jaws of those who surrounded him. A firm, harsh imprint of his fingertips inserted into the button. Staining his attire. Fixing up his tie. The people surrounding him stayed a clear 5 feet away. Looking just ahead, he remained quiet. In a cloth silence.

"What's he doing this time?" One of his employees thought. "Nercea hasn't been himself… for a while…"

Popping open like a fine can of beer. The elevator's shaft retreated away as Nercea stormed out. Any peaceful chatter, friendly nudges and slacking shattered. Like a slap to the back of the head. Everyone did not dare to look like a waste of space. Spacing their vision. He remained in their sights. His footsteps. Roaming towards his own personal office.

"Why is he fucking like this?" An employee sitting down uttered. "He doesn't need to speak to be threatening."

"Keep it down…" the quietest whisper was raised. "Don't let him hear you…"

It was already too late. Nercea, about 4 feet away from his room reached for something under his coat. There, a set of fliers. Files and whatever paper he didn't see was

useful. Pulling back his hand, a storming throw launched the paper everywhere.

“Get back to fucking work!” Nercea shouted. “All of you are like scared animals!”

Shifting the door out of the way. A cascading slam followed. Echoing everywhere. Nercea pushed to his chair. Folding his palms close to his face, he sighed. Being the king of the world. Perhaps, of all of mankind. Fingers slipped from his frown. Remembering everyone’s face in his dream.

“They… see me like… some… monster…”

Nercea’s pupils fixated upon the side wall. Rolling his swivel chair, there was his grandfather. Or at least, a picture of him.

“You gave me everything… the world… this company… a life…”

With the force of a zebra, his high-heeled boots spun him towards the picture. Which he stared at in awe.

“We found him… Bascone.” Nercea spoke to the painting. “I… I’m getting to your dream. If I can just create that gem. Then, that necklace is yours…”

Folding his head up, the origami paper of his face bent. Moulding cranes of despair.

“If I fail… it’s over…”

Anxiety nibbled away his skull. Like a pulsating feeling. Trembling in his sorrow, he rolled towards the corner of his cube.

“No… I can’t… I won’t fail…”

The smell couldn’t be so easily overlooked. Valerin’s quiver to the stench of old carpet hung in the air. It was close to Raymond’s den, and Bascone’s lair. Her head however pierced through the clouds. As the pool outside drew her attention.

“Good morning, dear, looking for a spot?”

“Yeah sure… got a room I can rent for until ah… next year?”

The lady was surprised. Taking on an expression, that of a confused wombat.

“I’m sorry but, you want a room here for until next year?” Her reply made Valerin feel uncomfortable.

“Well dear, I as a customer may be able to rent whatever I please. Do I not have the right to?”

Dragging out her pity fan, Valerin spun it frantically like a peacock. Hoping to dazzle the wombat lady. Having no resistance to begin with, the lady gave in. Feeling a sense

of excitement having such an esteemed person within her mist.

“Our rates vary.” She responded. “For this place you’ll be looking at $900 per week.”

“I can do that very well…” Valerin replied in a flattering, smug expression.

Slowly walking off, the teller observed as her star lit lips hobbled towards the stairwell after payment. Like a dog, excited to get the same meal again and again.

“My oh my… what is a pretty woman such as herself doing here?” The lady smirked to herself. “She must be on sort of mission.”

Dressing himself to the sung melody of Valerin’s voice, playing through his mind. Bascone kneeled down to finish patching his armoured knee pad. Like medieval con but… every day of his life. Suiting his pants up, a sudden call came from the door.

Meow!

As Raymond remained asleep, Bascone approached the door.

Meow! Meow! Meow!

Sliding his hand across the foot of the door handle, Bascone pulled it back.

Ahh!

A hollowed, bouncing scream shook the room as Bascone's cladded helmet and body slammed to the floor. Raymond woke up in quick haste. Thinking there was a home invader. Or Haffel.

"Raymond!" Bascone shouted towards. "The black cat is here again!"

Before he could fly out the window, Raymond jolted out of bed to pat the cat.

"Bascone… how many fucking times do I have to say? She's not cursed."

From the corner of his eye, Raymond witnessed the stunning figure of Valerin behind the front door. Waiting for Raymond to open it for her.

"Coming Valerin!" Raymond shouted.

Before unlocking the door, Raymond for shits and giggles picked up his cat to lightly toss at Bascone. PETA, don't get mad at me writing this. Laying out the cat food, he heard Bascone corner himself in the room whilst shouting

"Away from me vile beast!"

Soon, the cat ran away upon smelling food. Opening the door, Valerin was greeted and allowed entry.

“Hey Raymond, where’s Bascone?”

Raymond pointed to the voice coming from his bedroom.

“That way.” Raymond uttered.

Hung by the grasp of Valerin’s charismatic charm. The 2 joined by the open patio.

“So, how has your morning been?” Valerin snuggled Bascone.

“That damn cat of Raymond’s has been secretly cursing me… yet he refuses to admit it.”

Valerin sighed, playing into his delusion.

“It is such a shame… at my place I have only white cats. The most blessed, most truly wonderful colour.”

“Yeah… well anyways wanna help me with something?”

Valerin became pressed onto his issue.

“Yes, my so handsome knight?”

Walking back into the house, he returned with a most noble package.

“Haffel gave me this package and said to go on a noble quest today to deliver it.”

On the package was a red tinted, Aus post sticker on it. Shaped like a square. Valerin flickered an eye, interested in what it was.

“What’s inside?” Valerin asked.

“Haffel says it’s a most top secret… secret… secret. Apparently, we must deliver it to, Sir Aus post?”

“Post office.” Valerin corrected him. “Ok then, follow me.”

Beside the set of streetlights, Valerin hit the button which could yarn them across. Chucking a yawn, her eyes drifted to the coffee shop across from them.

“Hey Bascone.” Valerin turned to him. “Care for a coffee? We have all day you know.”

“That would be quite lovely. Haffel said we could do whatever we wanted as well.”

Roaming closer and closer, a cop had noticed Bascone. Hearing the clobbering of his feet, Valerin turned around.

“Oi mate, that’s a sword you got there isn’t it?” He asked, flicking his badge.

“Well why yes sir, do you like it?” Bascone turned and asked.

“Do you ever intend on using it?” The cop arched his stance with concern. “Is it just a prop or?”

“No no no… why would a knight like myself masquerade with a dummy sword? I’ve killed several enemies of France I’d have you know. Lobbed their heads off”

Sighing, the policeman looked up and down the man and his garments.

“Sir, I’m gonna have to confiscate that sharp weapon of yours…”

Raising his blade, he squared off in the face of the policeman present.

“Over my French frog flavoured cheese!” Bascone announced with a bonfire amount of confidence.

Valerin swung around. Trying to place distance between him and the officer.

“No stop officer… he’s… retarded…” She sprung a lie.

Zap!

Ahh!

2 prongs attached to Bascone's armour. Turning it into one giant toaster bath.

"What's this burning pain!" Bascone cried in pain. "Witch!"

Approaching the by now pissed duty guard, Valerin sprung her words.

"Look officer… he's just roleplaying. He didn't mean it harm you… how dare you hurt him!"

Moving his hands towards his radio. An incoming call about something more serious played back to him.

"You copy?" He spoke back. "Mam… keep him under control, ok?"

Running off, Valerin crossed the street with Bascone looking like he was pegged.

Nearing the footsteps of the post office. Valerin's eyes had been on the package he'd fumbled before. Observing the punched in cardboard, she could see little linings of something white.

"Hey Bascone." Valerin tugged. "I wanna put that package into the box."

Handing her the box was a mistake. Turning around, she quickly unbanded the package. Upon opening it, her eyes

frantically widened. Tossing the package away, Bascone quickly turned to shout,

“No that was for the quest!”

“Bascone!” Valerin shouted. “That looks like anthrax!”

Taking off his helmet, he to Valerin’s horror, wiped parts of his finger onto the powder and gently licked it.

“Hmm… tastes sweet.” Bascone replied.

While working on their assessment, Raymond remembered something Haffel told Bascone to do.

“Wait… you said to him to deliver a package, right?” Raymond told Haffel.

“Well yeah… I did it so we could have the house together.”

“What was in that package?” Raymond questioned her.

“Oh… just my sister’s cocaine.”

Chapter 16: Before Presentation

With pen in hand, overlooking Haffel's attempt of looming Bascone away. Raymond couldn't fathom such a question on his mind. Covered in red feathers. It crowed at him from afar.

"Hey Haffel." Raymond asked. "How… exactly will the chickens be kept on stage?"

She didn't have an answer. Her blank stare shot through the clouds.

"Ahh… I propose… they can just try not to make a cluck around the place?"

Taking one more cookie from the dwindling pile. He tried to reason how naughty her chickens are.

"You said they are well behaved right?" Raymond replied.

"Yeah of course." Haffel pushed home. "They are my good chookies. I love them and they won't harm a thing."

"That rooster did a few numbers towards Bascone's honour." Raymond leaned with a curled smile.

"That's because he can be an idiot sometimes."

"I don't think we'll have to worry too much. It's only a 5-minute play…"

Any mentioning of the run time sent shivers down Haffel's spine. Knowing that she, for at any point may be spotted and laughed at, created a ripple effect.

"Only… 5… minutes?" Her words stuttered.

"Plays aren't just little skits." He replied, reassuring her. "Come on… we came this far."

Her social battery drained the life force out of her. So, to bring her back. Raymond said,

"To stop them from pooping everywhere I reckon we get them to wear nappies."

Haffel's face went from drained, to an evenly cracking smile. Which blistered on the brink of a sharp giggle.

"You think nappies?" Haffel snickered, imagining their little bums running around.

Left on break, Haffel immersed herself in what we would call black romance novels. A particular one took her fancy. Alone on the couch, as Raymond was stuck outside doing chores. From behind, approaching footsteps of a familiar tone echoed

"Why are you reading trash?"

Haffel raised her eyes to Bascone who by this point, turned his toothbrush into a harmonica.

“Have you ever read this book?” Haffel slowly chimed.

“No… I have no need to read terrible works of fiction.”

“What do you like then?”

“I’ve been listening to Taylor Swift…”

“And you say you have good taste?” Haffel rolled her eyes. “That’s not even a book.”

Behind Bascone, Valerin was preparing one of her numerous plots. Stirring a roofie into Bascone’s drink. What she had failed to notice was Bascone himself. From behind, a slithering hand tugged onto her back before pulling her in. Feeling flustered, Valerin snuck the roofie bottle into her pocket.

“What’s that you placed into your pocket?” Bascone asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing…”

Before long, Bascone’s grip circled around the bottle. Pulling it out, his eyes fixated onto the words

“*Use on Bascone.”*

As Valerin thought her entire operation was no more, Bascone said,

“Oh… is this what makes my drinks taste better?”

“Well why… ah… yes Bascone. Here, have some.”

Yes, her dream finally became a reality. Bascone drank the glass, full roofie and all. The expression in her gaze was priceless. Surely no auction could ever buy it. No matter how rich or poor. Valerin's golden, glowing eyes sparkled. Just as a prince to his shining princess. Once it was finished, Valerin turned around the corner. It was perfect. Lure him out, out of Raymond and Haffel's reach. Then take him to Nercea. The guy was outside whilst Haffel was too busy reading about gay vampires. One minor problem, however.

Kiss!

Bascone spun her around, sharing a passionate kiss. Blending in, she held his hand. Holding his back whilst giving it to him. Then.

Thud!

Bascone fell to the ground without a huff.

"Yes, I finally managed to kidnap him!" Valerin's inner monologue shined. "I did it, I did it, I..."

Then… her vision started to fade.

"Oh fuck…"

Thud!

Just like an iron anchor. Valerin also fell unconscious. Unlucky.

Blurring through her eyes, the lashes of beauty awoke upon a hard, metal pillow. Valerin zoned her glasses in more. It was none other than Bascone. Laying her on his lap. His gripping hands strayed through her hair. Neatly unbinding all the stress of her world.

“Hello Valerin.” Bascone smiled.

She didn’t feel an angering urge to punch him. Or even retreat back into the shadow, lurking for another opportunity to strike. In her quivering daze, she laid there. Feeling every inch of his fingers glide through her hair like a cat.

“Whatever potions you must be casting must I say, they do a fantastic job at making people unconsciousness.” Bascone raised a finger.

“Yeah… potion…”

Not noticing her face curling a smile. Her breath slowed. Creeping to the speed limit of a school zone. Then just like any Bundaberg driver when no speed cameras are around, she swerved upwards at a hundred kilometres an hour.

“Yes dear?” Bascone shrugged surprised.

“I… just… can I sit next to you?”

Her back kneeled on something pointy.

Raymond with his bundle of ideas approached Bascone and a fairly sleepy Valerin. In one hand, he read out his assessment. In the other, he had a role to fill. Haffel stood beside him.

“Hey Bascone.” Raymond motioned to.

“Yes Raymond?” Bascone quietly asked, not wishing to awaken his beauty. “Be quick, you’re blocking the magic box I was watching foosball on.”

“I need someone to play as a villain for my play.” Raymond noted. “Would you like to be a part of my play?”

Bascone suddenly stood up fully erected. Hunched over with his hands around his waist. He spat out,

“Do you think I make a good villain because I’m French?”

“Yes.” Haffel smirked.

“No.” Raymond turned to Haffel. “I just… you have the character.”

Chapter 17: Show Time!

Haffel's eyes quivered. Knowing what was to come. She had agreed, fighting back every now and again. But, watching the curtain flicker a glowing light. Her body shifted like a husk. Scared to her core. As Raymond began plucking the superglue from her joints. A beam of light hit her eyes.

Hiss!

Haffel resisted again, she clung to the shadows to Raymond's annoyance.

"Come on Haffel." Raymond begged. "We've come this far. Please I don't wanna fail my assessment."

Held into Raymond's chest. A thumping beat of Haffel's fist pounded his ribcage. Crying,

"No I refuse!"

Wiping away her tears, Raymond pointed to the chickens in cages.

"The more time we waste, the more time your chookies are locked away. Don't you want them to see the crowd?"

She went dead silent. Staring at the chickens, each of them unhappy to be locked away. Suddenly, Bascone made himself known.

“Well hello Raymond, mind I ask if there will be any shagging women on…”

“Stage? Come on Bascone what fucking place do you think we’re in?”

“There are plenty of women in the crowd.” Bascone peeled back the curtains.

“Where’s Valerin?” Raymond asked.

“I’m not too sure. Maybe she’s in the crowd.”

Raymond released Haffel, to which she tried to run away. To then realise the doors were locked. Casting spells on them, it wasn’t until Raymond approached where she was pulled back in. A crimson dark cloak of several ribbons plummeted around her. Suiting her very well.

“I got you this for your character.” Raymond told her. “Remember the script? You’re Silo of Epin.”

Raymond walked her to the front of the curtains.

“I don’t wanna…”

Thrust!

Haffel’s back folded as Raymond’s shoving hand pushed through the glaze. Upon the other side, a massive crowd of families, students and teachers waited by the stage. Looming their eyes all on her.

“Begin!”

The lights dimmed as a circular panel surrounded her.

“I… I am the… the… the woman of the 7 pigeons!” Haffel shivered in loose formation.

Acting as the stage prop guy, Raymond shifted 5 white coloured chickens up on stage. To the strict and harsh glare of his drama teacher. Taking her pointer, her back bent slightly counting the chickens.

“I have 1, 2, 4, 2…”

Gasp!

Haffel’s character did the most fake, shocked face possible.

“Oh no!” Her character shouted. “2 are lost! Where are they!?”

Her hood drifted to and from the other sides of the stage. Trying to ignore the crowd, who were more interested in the chickens than her. Suddenly, another chicken was thrown out on cue.

“Oh…” Haffel ran over towards. “There’s 1 more…”

Suddenly, Bascone playing himself, strode out in full armour. Shining with a glamour that stole the show.

“Well… Haffel… I mean Silo of Epin…” Bascone uttered as Raymond face palmed. “Is it true they can lay golden eggs?”

Haffel rolled her eyes down like a bowling ball. In one of his hand, was another 1 of her chickens.

“Hey!” She shouts. “Give him back!”

“Act 1 finished… commence Act 2…”

As the curtains vanished, Bascone drew his blade. Facing off against Haffel.

“You think I… mighty Bascone will falter to you?”

Haffel’s finger leered behind him.

“Look over there!” Haffel shouted, with a smirk. “Cheap wine and a buffet of cooked frog!”

Expectedly Bascone swiftly turned around, simmering his lips.

“Where!”

Choak!

Haffel wrapped Bascone’s metal neck in her coat. Pretending to do a fake take down.

“You think you can take me down witch!?” Bascone shouted.

Little did he know, the chicken fled from his hands. 1 of the many naughty chooks strayed too close to the crowd. Throwing all sorts of food, the drama teacher was about to cancel the show. Haffel ran over to the chicken, quickly herding it back on stage. Then, the curtains fell once more.

“Act 2 finished… commence Act 3…”

Sat upon a nest, one of the chickens forced to sit down laid upon a bundle of golden eggs. Haffel’s coat floated above the floor, casting an eternal shadow. When she walked over, it sucked against her tapping feet. The chicken quickly wobbled over to her expecting food.

“Oh my! It laid a golden egg!” Haffel showed the crowd.

Smelling a moment to shine. Bascone’s character emerged from the darkness, quickly shifting towards the egg. Drawing his sword, he cornered Haffel.

“Give up the egg pal!” He shouted.

Grabbing the egg, he ran away. Before forgetting what gravity is.

Thud!

Tripping over, Haffel quickly ran over to retrieve the egg. Turning to the crowd, she smiled. Feeling on top of the world. Then, the curtains dropped. It was over.

“Act 3 finished!”

Dimming the lights to her face. Haffel afterwards ran behind stage. Both in tears and joyful sorrow.

“I… Raymond I… did it!” Haffel’s robe strode towards him.

“You did.” Raymond replied.

Haffel’s hands quietly unbuckled the robe. Underneath was her slouching, baggy pants and jumper he was accustomed to seeing her in. Throwing it to the side, her coat clung onto Bascone’s head.

“That was fantastic wit… Haffel!” Bascone shouted with a laugh. “Good on you…”

Her back slowly turned to Bascone. Used to him staring Haffel off from making contact. He approached her. Not as a nuisance, but as a friend.

“What a wonderful play you put on Raymond.” Bascone huddled with them.

“I made it specifically so that Haffel could be the star.”

Haffel's blush caused her to turn around.

"You… made it for… me to be a star?" Haffel's quivering words silenced.

"Why else would you be the main character?" Raymond added. "It at first was uncomfortable. But now, how do you feel?"

"I feel… fantastic… that, meant a lot to me Raymond."

"I'll admit for a witch I have never seen such confidence."

Slap!

Raymond's hand collided with the front of Bascone's face. Not in a harsh way, just in a way to get him to shut the fuck up.

"Not right now Bascone." Raymond remarked to him smoothly whilst holding Haffel.

Prompting her up like a superstar. Raymond let go of Haffel so she could grab her chookies before they got bored and flew away. Picking up the cages one by one, they were fed into a corner of clucking.

"You know Raymond… I see lots of potential within her." Bascone kneeled close to Raymond.

This out-of-pocket comment caused Raymond to turn shoulder.

“Look at you being all kind today.” Raymond nudged side to side.

Waiting in class for the inevitable grade. His teacher walked up and down the class. Attracting all sorts of attention.

“Congrats to all of my students.” The drama teacher opened up. “I must say you all had some interesting ideas.”

As his teacher neared Raymond, he plopped a fat pile of paper on his desk.

“Who had that chicken idea?” He asked, all disgruntled.

“It was me and my friend Haffel.”

Raymond glared at the paper. It was his grade.

“Only a C?” Raymond thought, slightly disappointed but happy at the same time to pass.

“You’re looking at your grade?” The drama teacher asked. “I felt like your play was uninspiring. Try better next time.”

Walking away, it felt like a nuke was let off at Raymond’s back door. Gently squeezing his palms over those eyes. His back anchored over the desk.

“Supposed I just passed?” He sighed. “Better than failing.”

Yet, the thought of Haffel’s happiness kept a kindle lit space in his mind. One of happiness. So, despite failing to achieve a grade not worth of yelling at him over. Bringing Haffel out of her shell was worth everything.

Chapter 18: End Of Year Exams

During the opening hours of Raymond's daylight. As Haffel was presumed asleep. He opened his phone. Texting,

"Hey Haffel… don't forget exams are coming up. Come over so we can study"

Laying in waiting, he could hear a fairly loud Bascone singing sweet nothings into the shower, just down the hall.

"At least I could get him to shower." Raymond uttered to himself.

Suddenly, he got a text back from Haffel.

"E… exams?"

Upon opening his door, Haffel was in a shifting manner of distress. Shaking whilst her bag laid dormant on her back.

"Morning, wanna study Haffel?"

She tried to turn around, sprint fully down the stairs and never come back.

Clamp!

Haffel felt her running fixate onto one spot as Raymond held her bag like some cartoon character.

“Let me go vermin!” Haffel shouted in a hiss.

“Come on Haffel, it’s just exams… why are you so scared of them anyways?”

She gently turned around, bawling out her eyes to attract sympathy.

“I… haven’t done one since year 7.”

At first Raymond was surprised by this assessment. Until he remembered she had been hiding out in that treehouse on school grounds for, seemingly years. All alone. Wanting nothing but the curtain to guide her.

“Haffel…” Raymond assured her. “I promise you, together we will succeed in this exam.”

She wasn’t so sure. Cradled with the success of his play however, Haffel locked eyes with him. Then immediately she began to cast magic.

Hiss!

“Make… exams… go away…”

Raymond blankly stared at her.

“It’s still here.” Raymond raised the exam study guide to her face.

Once more, she casted a spell.

“Burn that paper!” Haffel shouted in an emboldened rage.

“Then I’ll print another.” Raymond mentioned with a smirk. “Look Haffel, just come inside will ya?”

Bascone found himself in another moment, with himself walking in on Haffel and Raymond studying. Holding a toothbrush to his mouth.

“Hey can I have some money, Raymond?” Bascone vaguely asked.

Turning away from the study guide, Raymond curled up a disgruntled no and replied,

“Get a job. Plus, what do you need it for?”

“I want to buy Valerin something nice.”

Going back to work. Raymond noticed the time ticking closer to the start of his job.

“Thanks for coming over Haffel.” He spoke, but it bounced off her because her brain was full of knowledge. “I have to go soon. Did you learn anything?”

Haffel stared at the page.

“Numbers and… stuff…”

Upon the school bells screaming into the ears of those unfortunate to have been wagging close to them. Raymond shoved his bag upon his back, heading right to the library.

"Come on Haffel…" Raymond believed within all his heart. "I don't need to be caught near your treehouse. Ryan and the others would kill me. But we can succeed if you just try…"

When the shutters to the library opened. Raymond stumbled his feet towards the port rack.

"Wait… that's Haffel's bag." He noticed, getting somewhat excited. "She must be in here somewhere."

Roaming around the tightly packed library, full of seniors who actually care about their exams. In the far corner, he saw a table left alone to another person. Either they were really into The Aztec Empire, or it was someone who had noticed him walk in. Placing his fingers on the book, he shoved it down to see who was on the other side. The bucket hat however kinda ruined the surprise.

Hiss!

"Sunlight burns my skin." Haffel remarked.

"I'm here to help you study alright."

Sighing so loudly the paper of the book began turning. Haffel shuffled out a pretty copyright free pencil case that does not resemble hello kitty whatsoever. When the confines were released, Haffel extracted a couple of cutely coloured pens.

“Alright… do you have a textbook?” Raymond asked.

“I don’t have one.”

Plop!

One spawned from thin air.

“What subjects do you have?”

“I don’t know.” She replied, frantically uninterested.

“I figured you wouldn’t know. Could I maybe get your full name?”

“Haffel Witch of the Treehouse…” She responded.

“No. I don’t mean that Haffel.” Raymond’s eyes squinted further. “Actual name.”

No longer playing dumb, Haffel conceded.

“Haffel Mayflowers.”

Raymond physically removed himself from the chair. Darting to the exit, he walked over to the office.

Upon making his arrival back to Haffel, his eyes lit up in disgust. Taking a bite out of the page of her newly acquired textbook. Raymond yanked it away from her.

“Ew gross Haffel…” Raymond spun. “You don’t eat paper.”

“But the book was just begging to be eaten.”

“So Haffel, I believe the only subject you have for exams this year is English.”

“What’s English?” Haffel played dumb.

“The language you’re speaking.”

Ohh!

“I thought we spoke human.” Haffel’s head bobbled.

No matter how hard he could overlook her stupidity. Even her words made his insides tingle.

“No way she’s… no she can’t be that stupid…”

Getting her to open the book, he began trying to teach her via the assessment material.

“Haffel.” Raymond attempted to inspire. “Listen to me. We’ve made it this far. I believe we can do this alright.”

His pawls slipped upon her face. Lifting her head off from the desk. Behind those eyes, she hid her grievances. But it wasn’t until Raymond said,

“We have a lot to do don’t we?”

Out of sheer instinct, Haffel face planted her head into the desk. Raymond dropped his usual way of making her happy as she grieved. Tears formed from her eyes. Draining from her pours.

“I’m stupid… stupid… stupid…”

Raymond hung around her. Unwilling to act, for he didn’t know what to do himself.

“I hate myself… I hate I was born this stupid…”

Her shoulder brushed against Raymond’s chest. Hiding her tears.

“Haffel…”

“I hate this existence! That was a play before, but I can’t do this! It’s impossible! You don’t get it!”

All he could do was hold her. Sharing tears with her as well.

“Haffel… I… I’m sorry. But you can’t say that…”

“I have… failed… my level is… nothing. How could I ever be as smart as you?”

She continued to bail out her tears. Unable to stop like a busted open water pipe.

Ahh!

Rubbing her back, Raymond's voice became sooth.

"Haffel… nobody is stupid…"

"I… my home life sucks… before you came into my life… my parents wouldn't care if I ran away from home."

Holding her tighter. He let the water ducts empty until no more were there to suffice.

"Haffel… you mean more to me than anything. That's so horrible…"

"I can't do anything right…! I'm stupid…! I should die…!"

Raymond by this point had joined her. Stroking her head, he couldn't help but to feel for her. Yet, he didn't know why. Why the others hated her yet. She had been kind. Weird sure but… she had been someone Raymond had taken care of for so long. Bonded with. Thrived alongside with.

"Haffel…" Raymond replied in a deep, unbroken tone. "I'm so glad I met you… I hang out with my friends too but I… I can't give you up even if they call you a witch…"

"You… Raymond, Bascone and Valerin are the only friends I ever had…" She continued to cry.

“Well… what about primary school?”

She looked up into the stars for a bit, before immediately crashing down back to earth.

Ahhghh!

She continued drifting through her memory. Haunted by whatever black cloak Haffel hid under. He had enough of pushing. Raymond sat next to her, waiting for her to calm down.

“How… have your potions been?” Raymond distracted her. “What about your chookies?”

“What about them?”

His mind spun with her words. On other sides of a spiralling circle, he tried tying up her affection. Firing off any quick attempts to cheer her up. He pulled her out from despair.

“Haffel… you are always welcome to be by my side. Even if homelife is awful.”

Crawling out a bit. She looked towards her book with a half-eaten bite mark. Noticing this, Raymond said,

“Just… think of study just as how we practiced and planned that play.”

“But plays are different. It’s fun and…”

“Study can be fun.” Raymond installed into her. “Especially if we work hard enough with breaks in between.”

Falling upon a comfortable pillow. Her silver lining tone grew more pale. Less like a rowdy, sorrowful being of pure sadness. But that of, her. Herself. The side Raymond loved of her.

“Can… study be fun?” Haffel remarked, emerging from the darkness into light.

“Totally.” Raymond lifted her spirit. “We just have to make some changes and create goals for ourselves. Up until the exam, I’ll try my hardest to teach you.”

Her heart fluttered. Trusting his words, Haffel sank fully down to his lap.

“Thank you… I’m scared but…”

“Will you at least try?” Raymond made direct eye contact.

“Yes.” Were her last words. “I’ll try…”

Chapter 19: Exams!

The patient, slow moving time weighed on them all. Waiting outside the exams hall. Raymond found himself planted right beside his main friends. Joseph, playing off silly faces towards Mike. Had the hallmarks of ‘you studied way too little’. Sticking with his friend group. He could see Haffel from the corner of his eye. Raymond glanced for a while, noticing an overcoat straying over her seeping eyes. Keeping that look he was accustomed to under a hood. Yet, his friends were like a wired fence. Warding away the witch.

“How much did you guys’ study for the English exam?” Mike announced in a higher pitched tone.

“Ready Freddy!” Joseph hulled his hulking arms around Mike.

“I did a lot of study.” Raymond boasted. “So, I hope all goes well.”

Turning around to witness Haffel disappear from her previous spot, he made an excuse to investigate. Turning a corner, he yanked the collar of a fleeing Haffel.

“No Raymond.” She complained. “I… I don’t wanna…”

“Come on Haffel… we had so much work put into this exam. You can’t run from your problems forever.”

Dragging her back to the exam room. Raymond made clear that none of his palls noticed. So instead, he

pointed her towards the bench next to the study hall. There, she sat, her shadow clung to that bench like a harsh curse. Anyone who approached would be hissed away.

Creak!

Everyone's eyes were jammed right on the same spot. The principle came out. Waving normal papers. But was glad the exams were via paperbacks. No ChatGPT allowed.

"Good morning students of Truth State Highschool." She opened. "Today's English exam shares upmost importance. Demonstrating the talents of each and every one of you. If you did not take the study guide of at least 100 hours per week, you may fail."

Her snicker was felt through the crowd. It wasn't that funny. But some laughed at her joke. Feeling forced to by her glaring, piercing eyes. Haffel stayed still as if her bottom were frozen shut.

"But to be honest, many of you have been reported on by your teachers as excellent students. And I…"

Her eye struck Haffel out of nowhere. Wearing herself away slowly to avoid catching any curses from her.

"Wait… who are you?"

Forming a red forest of dark entities. The attention lifted onto her, was a lot to bear. Haffel's eyes darted everywhere. Raymond's friends gossiped about her. Yet, as she looked towards Raymond. His thumbs up allowed her to cut through the crap thrown at her. All be it her voice chittered like a flimsy plank of wood.

"I… I'm Haffel Mayflowers… here to do my exam?"

"Why are you out of uniform?" She squinted her eyes at her. "Wait… I could have sworn you dropped out ages ago…"

The principle took a quick glance at the list before being surprised by her appearance.

"Oh… you have been here?" She uttered with a swift change of mind. "But you haven't attended a class since… forever."

"That's cause she's a witch!" Joseph opened a preying laugh. Pointing and choaking her.

Everyone laughed, slowly migrating away from her. Raymond's back twisted and turned. Not wanting to blow his cover. He didn't know if retreating with the others was a good option, or if standing up for her would be good either. Weighing his options. Raymond made a smooth, stealthy approach towards the front of the crowd. Opening his voice box, he asked,

“Hey teach!” Raymond shouted as obvious as possible. “Is this the science exam!?”

Her jaw dropped as everyone fell silent, focusing on him. She couldn’t believe it. All the talk about English, and the glamour. Made him seem like a foolish, mind-absorbed daydreamer.

“N… no…”

Hahhah!

People began laughing at his stupidity. Despite how humiliating it was, upon everyone entering the hall he was able to approach Haffel. All it a tad bit embarrassed.

“You ready now Haffel?” Raymond asked, wiping away her tears.

“W… why? Why humiliate yourself? Like that?”

“Come on Haffel… I wish you luck.”

She sighed. Following him in.

Just like the fate of many, drawn and forced together in romance novels with super glue. 2 spare seats opened for the pair to sit beside. Fate just had it, that they had to do the exam together. Within the set of sheets, a rule set was placed firmly outwards. Reading like ‘don’t cheat’ and ‘do not use the exam paper as food’. Raymond watched

out for Haffel on that one. Stretching his knowledge. The procedures were already ushered out. Which was until.

Poke! Poke! Poke!

Raymond turned to his side, as Haffel broke the no speaking rule during exams.

“Psst… Raymond.” She whispered. “I… I’m nervous.”

“Calm down Haffel.” He assured her. “Remember what I said?”

“If all else fails, cheat?”

Raymond facepalmed. Trying to ignore her remark. Turning back with half his face plastered in his palm he replied,

“No just… give it your best shot.”

The time struck closer to the starting time of 12 pm. Others chattered. Bored out of their minds. Joseph, a few chairs ahead of Raymond opened his water bottle. Chugging the contents, he let out a slight burp.

“Yo Mike.” Joseph made him guess. “Wanna know what I brought?”

“What?”

“Vodka.”

The words between the pair couldn't really be heard. So, he just put his head down.

"Come on Haffel… we got this…" He thought to himself.

Taking a stroll out back, he waits for Haffel who's still struggling inside. But soon, she gets up. Ready to hand in her paper. Slumming over to him like an eel. Haffel gets ready for the inevitable question.

"How did you go Haffel?" Raymond asked.

Unsure how to answer, she asks him,

"Can you go first."

"I think I did very well… I was able to punch out the essay quickly, leaving me plenty of time to edit. What about you?"

"I wrote a word."

Raymond, surprised and excited, wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm so glad you did!" Raymond cheered, feeling how far she had come. "You did the exam Haffel…"

Letting her go, he got ready to relay some news.

"Hey Haffel." Raymond starts abruptly. "You made me so happy. Though, I forgot to text you about something.

Me, Jodie and Bascone are going to Perth over the school holidays. We can't leave Bascone alone because last time he was all by himself, he tried putting all the silverware in the microwave."

Meanwhile,

"How the fuck do I start this thing?"

Bascone, watching as the buttons slowly curled upon the screen. Managed to turn it on for 10 minutes. Waiting for some sort of healing magic to take form. Instead,

Bang!

Haffel smiled for a bit, but sort of died inside. Since he'll be gone over the holidays. And nothing but the cold, closeted door was all she could talk to.

"Wow… that's great…" Haffel plastered a fake smile. "I'm happy for you."

"I'll still be here. But I'm leaving next week. See you when I get back to school. I'll be at a distant family member's place. I'll text you so, don't go insane."

Chapter 20: Bascone Saves Christmas!

Filler: “don’t skip it’s good”

Taking a huge stroll around Sydney's shopping mall. Raymond, along with his friends Ryan, Joseph, Mike and Henry enjoyed a long walk. Being in the Christmas season, Santa had his boogieboard out on a fine beach upon coming down under. The air conditioning however had to blast in negative degrees. Replicating winter conditions. Nearing the edge of an escalator, Ryan took his first strides to the bottom floor.

"What are you guys getting for Christmas?" Raymond asked politely.

"AIDS." Replied Joseph.

Raymond's eyes curled around his skull as the group slightly chuckled.

"You getting another monitor for your PC set up?" Mike turned to Ryan in a cheery manner.

"Perhaps, but I think that will be by my own money. Mom has been wanting to buy me a nice leather jacket."

Henry then mentioned,

"We should hang out some time over the holidays."

"Sorry mate." Raymond leered his face. "I'll be in Perth."

They didn't shrug or bother too much. Besides, there could always be next time. Upon reaching the floor,

Raymond immediately picked up on one particular individual who he had grew accustomed with. His eyes erected upon his hind legs. Raymond and his friends passed by Bascone, crashing in as mall Santa.

One kid from the crowd of many rested firmly within Bascone's metallic lap. Slightly complaining about the armour he wore. Eventually, he would make a hot pocket place to rest within his lap. Bascone, with a Santa hat overshadowing his helmet turned to the child.

"Hey there kid, I heard you've been a good boy." Bascone mentioned through his helmet. "What would you like for Christmas?"

"Fo… for Christmas?" The child lit up in excitement and joy. "I'm so happy to meet you Knight Santa… for… Christmas… I want a baby brother…"

Then, Bascone turned to the mother. Using his pointer, he formed a finger gun. Shooting it right at her.

"I'll throw you in a free one." Bascone winked.

Expectedly, the mother's face soured as she rushed to lift her son off Bascone's lap.

"What the!?" She shouted. "Get away from my son!"

Yanking the child away, he had no idea what Bascone mentioned. However, there was next kid. Quite a rotund one. Ran towards him like Bascone was an ice cream truck.

“Hey Santa.” The beluga whale came running over.

Plop!

Ahh!

“Can I get a Death Star copyright free Lego set for Christmas!?” His childlike voice squeezed.

“I think you need to lose some fucking weight.” Bascone yelped in sheer pain. “God you’re crushing my thighs.”

Next in line came miss Valerin herself. Adorn in what can only be described as more skin than Miss Clause. Her wavy Santa hat shrugged downwards, upon her falling flat on his lap.

“Well… well… Hoe Hoe Hoe.” Bascone remarked inappropriately.

“I have a fine, most noble quest for you my darling Bascone.”

His eyes tilted to the side as his once happy demeanour soured.

“Do you realise not every knight goes on notable quests? Sometimes we kill and plunder. What you said was mere slander.” Bascone trotted about.

“Well… do you have an available time?” Valerin requested. “It’s urgent and… ah… you are my loving knight, so you have to…”

“I’ll be on break soon.” Bascone stroked her back. “It’s only 30 minutes so, be quick.”

Finishing with a beauty kiss, she left him alone.

Meeting in an alley, a weird sense of something going wrong occurred to Bascone. Turning each corner however, he would bump into Valerin with a sack of presents.

“Hey my dear Bascone.” Valerin snuggled. “I have these presents for you to hand out. Go and be my most humble knight and distribute it to the points I’ve marked on this map.”

“You might have to guide me.” Bascone shook his head.

“Just go to the spots that will have white paint on the floor.” Valerin directed him, suspiciously, but not enough to alert Bascone.

Bascone was gifted a sack and made to sail away. Upon making their way to the first stop, Valerin snuck behind some bushes. Preparing a giant metal cage, she pulled the rope. When Bascone was in range.

Thump!

To her dismay, he moved way too quickly. Throwing the present down, his hind legs shot out into the air upon hearing the slam.

“What on earth was that?” Bascone looked over his shoulder clueless.

Watching her Wild Coyote plan fail, Valerin out of sheer anguish rushed along to catch Bascone at the next spot.

At her next placement, Bascone took one of the presents and laid it down onto the ground as instructed. Knowing a dart gun would be useless against armour, she tried a big malice hammer.

“If I can just get one hit on him…”

Swing!

Unfortunately for her, Bascone moved on. But another person was in range.

“Hey Val…”

Bonk!

Haffel's face took a blow, levelled to that dropped onto uneven ground by a cannon ball.

Ahh!

In a frantic panic, over potentially losing her cover, Valerin dashed away. Cutting through a ditch in order to meet Bascone halfway to the next point.

"Sorry Haffel ah… construction work!"

Waiting by a handy bus stop, Bascone tucked down below a red ribboned present. After such walking, the man sighed before taking off his helmet in a sweating haze.

"This job is easy… although my break is almost over."

Creeping from behind, Valerin exerted a finely knitted rope aiming straight for his neck. Ready to pounce, her feline passion allured him. Then, noticing a particular scent of perfume and kidnapper, he turned around. Caught right in the act, Valerin shifted the rope behind her back. Which was until,

"Valerin." Bascone addressed her in a serious delight. "This has been a fun time with you."

Dropping the act, Valerin's frustration diminished as Bascone's loving arms caved onto her. Trapping her within his grasp. Then, a sudden feeling pressed within her. She couldn't continue this game. Nor bother to even play it. Turning her frontal gaze. Valerin's once sturdy focus unravelled faster than Grandma falling down the stairs. Soon, Valerin shifted away from Bascone. Cupping her hand around her face. She whispered to him,

"I… I've been getting this feeling. I don't know what it is. Throughout my life I've never felt this way. It makes me feel sick but, I can't describe it…"

"Would you later like to talk about it over a cup of spirit coffee?" Bascone hugged her back.

"I… mean sure…" Valerin accepted the request.

Singing rosy, red jingle bells, the crowd was hit by hypnotic symphonies of some jazz piano. Beside the musical genius woman, a flame of beautiful words flourished from her beating heart. In a downstairs expresso bar, both Valerin and Bascone sat together. Almost as if planning a family lineage. One side of gorgeous freemasons. The other side of frog munchers.

"This is such a nice spot." Bascone mentioned, holding up a cup of hot latte.

“I looked into Google reviews, and this place has some fantastic experiences during the Christmas season.”

“Hey… Valerin?” Bascone asked without skipping a beat. “Why is it Christmastide but yet it’s not snowing?”

Valerin paused for a moment.

“Well, we are fairly far from France.” Valerin explained in detail. “Did the others tell you?”

“A while ago Raymond did so yes, I just feel so hot sometimes getting out and about this December.”

Before Valerin can explain her plans for Perth,

Ring!

Her phone exploded in a surprise call. Not by Santa but by a jolly Nercea waiting for his real Christmas present.

“Hello there my toolbox. It’s been a while…”

Stuttering on her own words as the moment drew near. Valerin’s finger slipped. Hitting the hangup button.

Beep!

“Hey Valerin what was that?” Bascone asked of her.

Rushing through her mind were the millions of thoughts. Of how she had been distracted by Bascone. Instead of acting on her master’s orders.

“Ah oh… nothing…”

She took in one more breath of freedom. Having no idea what washed up over her. Letting the holiday cheer overwhelm her, she forgot about the assignment, for at least until she can say see you next year on new year’s.

Trapped in his office. The weary Nercea drank from a hot chocolate. Imagining snowflakes and carols, his outside window reflected on the inside a calm, frosty breeze. That from his aircon.

“That girl, I pray she’s merely wrong place wrong time.” Nercea mumbled to himself.

He remained alone. Sharing a Santa’s hat complete with a pom pom. Ravelled in red, he tilted his glass up to the portrait of his grandfather.

“Don’t worry granddaddy.” Nercea broke the silence. “My plan is coming together. My toolbox is slowly manipulating Bascone. I believe by next year, we’ll be able to forge the stone for you. Merry Christmas mate.”

Year 12

Chapter 21: Start Of School? Fuck!

Fresh from chasing Bascone around Perth, saving him from being pecked at by the endless cockatoos. Whilst accepting Western Australia's status as paradise on earth. Thoughts of the plane skyrocketing through the atmosphere played in his mind, as Bascone saw what no mere mortal from his time could have ever dreamed of. The heavens. Continuing his path, he had failed to notice a bobbling figure left in the distance. Which was until he neared the school gate. The hooded figure quietly crept up to him, causing Raymond a shivering reaction. Slumping over to Raymond like a floating balloon. The figure began to mumble.

"6 weeks… alone… forever…"

By now Raymond had stayed motionless in terror. Unable to distinguish them from friend or foe. But soon, the voice which grew female characteristics stood clear. However, the bucket hat was a dead giveaway.

"Alone… forever…"

It had been Haffel. Hiding her over luscious hair. Once in clear view of Raymond, her head buckled down below. Avoiding eye contact.

"H… Haffel?" Raymond asks, confused to all hell.

Soon her saliva and words intermingle, gargling incomprehensive jargon. Sighing painfully, Raymond grips the top half of her hood. Lifting it up until it

reached the very bottom of her hat. Out of horror, he lifted it down.

“No… don’t touch it…” Haffel’s wheezing hiss flew like the wind.

Taking off her hat, she begged him not to do it. Then,

Yoink!

Hiss!

Haffel’s face exposed to sunlight. Horrifying Raymond as to what was underneath. Layers of piercings littered her nose and ears. Thick, gothic eyeliner and makeup coated Haffel’s murky expression. Making her appear more like a ghoul rather than the lovable witch everyone loved or groaned about. What remained was a shell of her former cutie, innocent self. That portrait of surreal, romantic beauty replaced by banana and tape. Her old form was dying. Whoever did this horrendous act would pay big time. Racing in a panic, he started asking questions she was too feeble to answer.

“Who did this to you?” Raymond expelled out of horror.

“N… no…”

“Come on now… we’re going to the treehouse…”

Raymond gripped Haffel's weak, puny hand. Taken through the school, the newly year 12's raced down to the oval.

"But… what about the assembly!?" Haffel cried. "You might get detention if you…"

"I don't care… nobody does this to my beloved Haffel!"

Courted at the treehouse's veranda. Raymond's voice plucked any info it could. Interrogating her like a detective.

"Who made you look like this?" Raymond didn't waste time.

"It was… my sister…"

Raymond's eyes widened. Feeling sympathy boil over to rage, he slightly pulled down on her nose ring first.

"This isn't you…" Raymond felt sympathy. "Plus, imagine how much more fun will be made of you."

"No!" Haffel hissed like a viper. "It… it is me…"

Death staring at Haffel, Raymond's tears flourished from his eyes.

"The Haffel I knew… was beautiful… come on Haffel… she made you look like this on purpose."

Falling into a blank void, Haffel's eyes devolved and gave way. Taking out the nose ring, a sly ouch followed.

"You have to remove your other piercings." Raymond silently calmed down.

One by one, the ugly and horrifying marks made by her sister shrunk. Like a rotten garden, full of weeds sucking the life out of nutrition. Painstakingly, he took to apart the cancers. For underneath was the shining sands he had known.

"You need to clean your face." Raymond steadily shuffled through her hair. "You look like a clown with that makeup."

One by one, everything was cleared. Until,

"Wh… what about my hat?" Haffel mentioned.

Standing as a corner stone to her identity. Raymond's face soured. Gently removing the hat, he stopped Haffel last minute.

"No…" Raymond was staunchly opposed. "That hat is a part of you… I have not seen anyone so… bright. Wearing a bucket hat as you have been. You chose to wear it."

Sunken so deep, nothing would pull her away from his words. Haffel bubbled up before leaning in for a hug.

“Th… thank you…” a heartfelt comment leaped from her mouth. “Do beautiful women look like what I wore before?”

“No…” Raymond responded, holding her cheek. “Someone’s pureness comes from their own choices. And it’s freewill to wear this hat… just as I chose to take care of you away from my friends because… because… I chose this path… that’s why… I care not just for you but also Bascone and Valerin. I ‘am independent. Just as you are your own self.”

She couldn’t see it, but something in his voice was erupting out as a flaring blush followed. Before anything occurred, Raymond’s face turned to the ground. Almost jumping out of his sitting position on the porch, 2 men he could vaguely remember seeing walked past. Yet, they had spent a couple of minutes seemingly observing. Studying like hawks from below. One in a shitty drawn mullet, and a face which read ‘I hate people I have no idea about’. The other, one of the Asian folks he remembered walking off to class with Ryan and the others. His skinny yet hulking frame left more to be desired. Mullet kid was a mere 4 foot in comparison to Raymond. They just stared. Shifting their gaze eventually to their phones as they retreated. The pair gave Haffel and Raymond a fright.

“Th… thanks for today Raymond…” Haffel turned back and smiled.

Off towards his English class, Raymond had ignored the fact the yearly wasting time feast was continuing in the hall. Popping open the Yonda pouch he and his friends broke to the point that it looked operational, however it was easy to crack open. The time struck closer to first period. Instead, he made a back detour of the school. Trekking along the back stretches of classrooms before making his way to the English classroom. Upon making a swift break for the stairs, Raymond’s tunnelled down the upstairs compartment. Until he entered his open classroom.

“Hey miss…”

The teacher almost had a blood-stricken heart attack. Slamming the tray hiding her drinking set, the teacher asked,

“Promise not to say a word?”

Having no knowledge of what she had been doing, he awkwardly approached his usual sitting spot whilst the teacher did up her flask.

Approaching the usual sit around hangout place, Raymond kept his hands tucked by the wayside of his pockets. Leaving a silent cough with less to be desired. Everyone was there. He could see Henry getting along with Mike and Joseph. Ryan sat by, playing on his phone secretly. But Raymond couldn't shake off the newly arrived individuals. At first, he could only see the rim and outlines of their faces. Further closing in the gap left by the grass patch alerted Raymond to who they were.

"Mate, The Storms are shit compared to last season." One of the new faces revolved onto his hips.

"Cameron, it's just a phase." Mike stared at him. "The Rabbitohs will surely lose next season."

Then, Raymond placed his backpack upon the side of his table. But to his surprise, everyone went dead silent. He had a look around. Raymond's gaze shivered, coated by the dark, once bright forest. Illuminating across the wooden bench.

"Hey everyone." Raymond waved. "How's life been?"

Harshening their brows at him. Raymond turned to anyone for information. Directing towards Ryan, he asked,

"What's up with everyone? What did I do?"

“Raymond…” Ryan expressly demanded to know. “Did you dare to hang out with that girl again?”

Putting up a fake target, Raymond smiled in an awkward fashion.

“What… her?” He snickered away. “Ah… why would you think I’d want to be with her?”

However, his lie didn’t phase anyone. And once he noticed nobody’s mood changed. Raymond went into a hushed panic mode.

“That’s not what Cameron and Darran said.” Henry paused his gaze onto Raymond.

If he had any hopes of gently crawling out of this one. They were diminished upon Cameron showing everyone his phone. Shaking in his sitting pose. Before the eruption rocked off. Raymond requested to know,

“Why… do you guys actually consider her cursed?”

Chapter 22: Riddle Me This Raymond

Having no rebuttals to save his ass. Raymond's frame slowly crawled in on itself. Cameron then let out a loud, whaling sentence.

"Is this guy retarded!?" Cameron shouted, aiming his voice directly towards Raymond.

Remaining still in a raging water. Nobody at the table came to help him. Until Ryan finally decided to burst open the bubble.

"Fine Raymond… I'll tell you. The truth and only the truth… we just *~never liked her…*"

Ryan's sentence broke his mirrored expression to pieces. But as Ryan continued, a rising flame began to cast upon the field. From a small cup of gasoline, it would burn down everything.

"She was a loser… someone who nobody liked. And we were trying our best to protect you from her. We never picked on her… we just… *~left her to rot…*"

Raymond looked down to his blood red palms. His veins inflamed and knuckles aching in fury. All his time with Haffel. The care, olive branching and his desire to watch her succeed. Disregarded by their ignorant tones. Which was until Raymond stood on his high legs and shouted,

"None of you know who she truly is!" Raymond shouted, under pressure and showed the evidence.

As expected, his noise became suppressed by the table's shouts at him. Pushing him closer and closer into a corner. But it was all a ringing bell, combing back his ears. In his predicament, he turned to Ryan beside him. That calm, loving smirk however, gone. Instead replaced by a frown and a crown of disappointment. They made eye contact; Ryan's eyes descended to the ground. Unable to see him as a friend no more. Gritting his teeth, he shouted in anger,

"That's it! You think she's a witch!? How about I prove you all wrong!?" Raymond paused to wipe some tears. "I will never let any of you again say such thing to someone I… I…"

Raymond's bag lifted from the steaming hot concrete as he was exiled. Bracing for the storm that was ahead. Straying onto the oval, an ever-present feeling of butterflies filled his stomach. His mind fluttered, nesting on the many thoughts of him and Haffel together. He had held her. Either her hand or through the way of modern life. Feeding her bread instead of nothing. Growing her mind in excess. This was no going back. He had seen it all, exposed to too much.

Climbing the stretch of ladder into Haffel's chamber. His notable fingers slipped passed the barrier. Drowning

Haffel in darkness. Her eyes pranced onto him. She knew exactly what happened.

“Haffel… come with me…”

“No!” Haffel cried, sensing his desperation. “I… I don’t want to!”

Drawing on all his might and tears. A clenching force bit through his tongue. Bleeding his begging onto her. Lifting her up from the treehouse, Haffel and Raymond walked the stretch of oval. Towards their unknown fate.

“Why?” Haffel cried her tears. “Why are you doing this? I hate the sun!”

“I’ve had enough… of everyone thinking you’re evil… Haffel. You mean more to me than you realise. I have spent a year with you. Watching you grow and coming out of that shell of yours… I’m sick of hiding our relationship. I’ll tell the world you aren’t a witch!”

Realising what he meant. She could see in the distance Ryan and the others. Hissing at Raymond, the sun kissed up and down her neck. As the pair neared. Everyone apart of Raymond’s old group rose their eyes. Every single one of them, pausing their discussion. Just observing. Haffel held onto Raymond’s hand. But slid behind Raymond once they noticed her.

“You think this girl is a monster!?” Raymond shouted in anger.

Raymond peeled away from Haffel shivering behind her. Exposing Haffel to the gazes of his friends. Then Ryan once more felt disappointed. Seeing that their hands were glued together. Instead of raising his voice like expected, Ryan began to cry. Turning around to stare Haffel in the face. Raymond’s loving emotions opened the universe of opportunity within her.

“You’re not the monster you believe yourself to be… nor what others think…”

Then, it happened…

Kiss!

Finally releasing his passion onto Haffel. All his protecting, cuddling, and outright love caressed onto her lips. And as the world burned around the pair. Raymond felt happy. In his attempt to no longer hide such a relationship. Everyone in disgust started a shouting match towards him. Once Raymond’s tongue left Haffel’s mouth. She looked up at him. All was fine. Then.

“She… she set my house on fire and… killed my mother, Raymond.”

Thud!

Ryan's sentence caused Raymond's heart to plummet. His words caused a chain reaction within Haffel. Making her cry in a deep panic.

"This is why I'm the monster Raymond!" Haffel's tears began choking her. "I… I didn't mean… *~ahughh!*"

Haffel slipped away as Raymond's entire spinal cord froze. Feeling his saliva dry up. He couldn't help but rest his palm within his hand. Realising the cat was now out the bag. Suddenly, Charlie manifested out of thin air. Chewing him out with his loud roar. Joining the reckless band of shouts. Feeling unable to move. Raymond also began to cry. Then in a rogue state, his footsteps stumbled onto the oval. Carrying with him a rise in anxiety. Yet, he wanted to know more. A woman like Haffel and her isolated ways. Wouldn't make her a monster. She had placed many touching smiles on his face. Sure, her and Bascone bantered occasionally. But truth be told, everything began lifting up between them. Each step plummeted Raymond further into a draining pile of mud. Aching his desire to know more.

Climbing up the treehouse. He was met by a distraught Haffel lying on the floor. Making a pool of what he was praying wasn't blood. Thankfully, he lifted Haffel up onto his lap. And she was unharmed.

“Haffel… are you ok?”

“Why? Why do all of this for… me?”

“Isn’t it obvious Haffel!? I love you! I hate seeing you be treated the way you are!”

For the next few minutes, Raymond stroked Haffel’s sorrows away. Wiping her tears to the pits below.

“I’m… I’m sure that story isn’t true… you could never hurt a fly… Haffel… you are precious to me.”

“No… Raymond…” Haffel wiped away a tear. “What he said… was true…”

17th January 2015, summer

A younger and way shorter Haffel enjoyed the company of her bigger sister. Looking up to her in every way, aligned to some Godly being. Every time Haffel noticed her bigger sister buckle out of the car with cigarette in hand. Her hopes were raised it would be a fun afternoon. They would jump firmly together on the trampoline. As her sister would make Haffel run around all day catching butterflies. Even in some instances, offering her rewards.

“How many butterflies did you catch today?” Haffel’s sister asked her.

“About 3 I believe.”

Raising the catching box high for Haffel to see. Her delight was profound.

“Could I have them?” She asked Haffel. “I want to do something with them.”

That was then, right in front of her eyes. She saw another side to her. Trading the butterflies for a cigarette, Haffel started lighting it up with a lighter.

“Could I borrow that from you?”

She snatched the lighter out of Haffel’s hand and started a fire within her backyard.

“Wanna watch something neat?”

To her horror, Haffel’s sister threw the butterfly cage which they were locked in, directly in the fire. She laughed at Haffel’s immense cries.

“No!” Haffel’s tears ran red. “You killed them!”

Later, the pair played in the front yard. To Haffel, she was having the time of her life. Although still crawling back from the incident, where 3 butterflies had their life force extinct. Her sister had been showing her leaves in the yard, then setting them ablaze and stomping them out.

“Hey… you see their yard?” Haffel’s sister pointed to the neighbour. “Would be sick if you did it in front of their porch.”

“Hey… don’t you think that’s dangerous?” Haffel remarked innocently.

“No, it won’t… trust me Haffel…”

She silently nodded as she was handed some palm leaf. The entire thing outshined her completely. Casting a rimmed shadow over her domed forehead. Snigging it into the neighbour’s yard. She in sick satisfaction cheered her on. When in range, Haffel started using the lighter to incinerate the hell out of the leaf. Taking to an under leaf, the bastard caught fire. Haffel watched in silent satisfaction until it began springing up everywhere. Out of fear she had flung it onto the ground. Fleeing to the pathway. Having no time to stomp on the blaze. She cried,

“Big sis! Big sis! It’s burning!”

“Don’t worry!” Haffel’s sister smiled. “I’ll put it out.”

Running into the house. Haffel jumped and scattered around in fear. Unable to keep her mind afloat. Eventually, her sister returned with a cup of something. Throwing it onto the blaze, a fact became clear. It was not water. It was gasoline. Sprinting to the neighbour’s

wooden estate. The fire burned through the door. Haffel could only watch. Then, it happened.

Ahhhh!

Raymond remained silent as the story slid through his ear. Leaving a trail of anger and sympathy behind.

“Wh… why? Why did nobody tell me?”

“…”

Then, Haffel started to tear out her eyes.

“Th… this is why for… this whole time I… I’ve been all alone… I thought it was my fault for the longest time! But… I’m stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! For this whole time, I was hated for being born! Accused of being a witch not just because they believed I was, but because they hated me! And for years I have wasted away alone! Dreading any contact from the outside!”

Rubbing her face. Raymond too began the process of breaking down. In his state of delirium. He pieced the story together. And realised, it was curiosity. It may had led him on a path to eventually fracture any friendship with the others. But it caused him and Haffel to be together. It caused Bascone to form a friendship with him, and for Valerin to slip into their life somehow. During the chaos. Raymond told something to Haffel.

“Haffel… I want you to… marry me…” He blurted.

“But… why?”

“I can’t stand you being around bad influences. But I will promise to stay by your side… I love my friends and feel sorry for Ryan but… but… this isn’t ok…”

Chapter 23: Fire

Minutes passed swiftly as the pair were continuing to remain put in time. By now, Haffel rested her back along the wall. Quietly cuddling and holding Raymond.

“Why?” She asks Raymond. “Why do this? Why all for me?”

He didn’t know how to respond. Instead, he went with the obvious.

“Because I love you… you can come out of the shadows. I’ve seen it with my own 2 eyes.”

It warmed her heart. Erasing away some of her crying sadness in the process.

“Raymond…” Haffel asked. “Do you think I’m a monster?”

“Nonsense.” Raymond insisted on telling her. “You are no monster… I just want to protect you.”

Pausing for a while. He raised enough courage to state,

“You were a fucking kid Haffel… I know you more than anyone and you are no monster… sure you and Bascone have moments but it’s nothing… you can’t be judged for something you were manipulated into doing.”

“I… guess you’re right…”

Something then doesn’t seem right. Eclipsing a scent of burning. Haffel was out in a daze. Snuggling next to the

only man to have ever shown her sympathy. Then, a sudden gust of smoke ransacked the treehouse. Standing up he shouted,

“Haffel get up!”

Jumping up to meet Raymond, the pair raced to the veranda. A medium sized blaze began ripping apart the tree they called home.

“Haffel!” Raymond shouted. “We gotta jump!”

Running towards the ledge to the drop which measured only about 3 metres. Raymond held Haffel’s hand, pressuring her to jump as well.

“We have to jump Haffel!” Raymond’s worry emphasised. “Hold on!”

With pure instincts, Haffel clung onto Raymond’s much taller frame before he descended from the treehouse. For a second, nothing laid below them. Other than a raging fire. As the pair felt the heat swelter their toes. They ran as far as they could out of the blaze. Watching out for Haffel’s back. Raymond succeeded in keeping her jacket and hat unburned. Turning around however, 2 distant figures ran across from the oval. Behind some ditch to escape. Raymond knew who they were.

“Those… bastards Cameron and Darran…”

Shaking his fists violently. He and Haffel made a sharp distance away from the blaze as the firemen were called to the site. Escaping death, everyone believed it was Haffel who casted a fireball spell. Yet, it wasn't her. Further and further away. Haffel watched her den she locked herself in for so long, melt and smother away. Burning the fractured nails along the foundations. It soon enough collapsed. They were lucky to have been alive. Making it out in a swift manner. Panting, their moral had been struck down. Suddenly, Raymond received a message from Ryan on his phone conveniently not locked away.

"Hey, Raymond. Can we talk second lunch?" Raymond read out in his head. "Come to the stairwell in the back of the school. Come alone, we need to talk."

Looming his eyes over the message. He hid it away from Haffel. Who was too busy covering herself from the sunlight. Hearing the lunch bell ring, Haffel held Raymond tight before landing a tiny kiss on his side.

"Thanks… for everything…"

Letting go, the pair went their separate ways.

"Haffel…" Raymond called out towards. "I promise to be there for you, always…"

Each footstep slowly drained away 1 part of his sanity. Combing over his shoulder. His eyes dashed around for any sight of his friends. No less, he was strictly alone. Haffel found somewhere else to bury her head in the sand. 1 by 1, the population density shrank as he encroached an empty, decrepit part of the school. Like entering the past, although, he couldn't get away from what he did prior. Taking a left, he was then met by the sight of something striking. Off to the side, he could see him. Ryan. Clasping his hands together. As Raymond approached, steadily and calm. His ever-present eyes acknowledged his existence. But he never spoke. Ryan listened to his nearing footsteps. Trembling as the only smoking pot in the area. Raymond's voice box dramatically shrunk. Feeling his skin stiffly wiggle off from the bone and flesh. Within about a few feet away from Ryan, he stated,

"Raymond… this entire time I have done nothing but protect you from her. You are gullible, but you had to find out thanks to that curiosity…"

Raymond gritted his teeth.

"You lied to me. You wanted me to believe she was an evil witch?" Raymond inserted into the play. "Haffel isn't evil… she's just…"

"A monster…"

When Ryan finished his sentence for him. The memories of Haffel flowed back to him once more. Of what she was really like. Misunderstood.

“I want none of it Raymond.” Ryan built up his feelings. “Think Raymond, don’t you think me seeing her would only ever continue to haunt me? If she didn’t do what she did, you wouldn’t have been told she’s cursed in the first place. But you believed it, didn’t you? You believe everything you’re told.”

“She didn’t do it!” Raymond argued his point, frantically twisting and turning. “She told me it was her sister!”

“You spoke to her… again?” Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Look at the papers dammit! Evidence! It was clearly murder! She was a waste of human life… so please Raymond… this isn’t towards you… it’s because of her…”

Jumping from tight rope to tight rope. The force of impeding questions started surfacing. Choaking deeper than any forcefield imaginable.

“You have a choice Raymond…”

“No!” Raymond cried in anguish. “I don’t wanna! I don’t wanna lose anyone! Ryan you are my friend!”

“It’s between me… or her… if you chose her, that witch… then you shall be kicked out of my Garden of Eden…”

Raymond cried, begging for reason.

“You can’t be serious! I have been with her since day 1 of year 11… she’s the sweetest, kindest, most innocent person I’ve ever laid my eyes upon! You shouldn’t gate keep me away all because I love someone like her!”

Ryan continued to stare. Piercing a round cylinder hole through his pupils. Once more, a faint scent of her presence flickers in Raymond’s mind. Pulling him over towards her side. How she climbed into his lap. And presented her game. Then the time they spent over at Raymond’s place. Walking home from school, holding her hand. Then, Raymond snapped back once again.

“You can’t control who I affiliate with!” Raymond expressly stated. “This is utter madness! I understand you lost a loved one but…”

“What if it was your mother who died?”

Raymond’s words turned to ice. Unable to comeback with anything. The thought of Jodie, incinerated by flames. His eyes darted towards the floor. Losing a grip, he sighed. But then, a gaping hole started to refill his heart.

“I would be mad… but… but… I know she wouldn’t do something like that on purpose…”

Watching each other’s souls collide. Ryan thought it pointless. Having enough, he said something to break his spirit completely.

“Then, I’m sorry… I’ll have to let you go…”

Thud!

Ryan started to descend the stairwell. All the while Raymond fell to his knees on the pavement. Begging and pleading for Ryan to be once more a friend. It broke him completely.

“No! No! Ryan! No!”

The other friends of Ryan’s poked around the corner. Retreating with them, Raymond was left in the dust. Just to hold his hands against his face.

From afar, Haffel slowly approached. Having watched the scene unfold from cover. Hearing the clobbering of her shiny shoes. Raymond turned to face her. However, this encounter differed. From prior times he had been the hope to hold her up high. But now, he was a shell of his former self. Alone to suffer.

“You… did this… all for me?”

“Ignorance won Haffel… I’m so sorry…”

Out of their line of sight. Some mysterious figure, identified as Adam sat above the stairs. Observing the pair, the look on his face was that of despair. Raymond hung by, clasping his knees. To the cold abyss of light. There, above them all, he whistled. Humming like a bird’s call. He, Raymond, had been torn apart. Unable to seemingly recover. Yet what entered his eyes was Haffel. Kneeling beside the distraught Raymond. She grabbed his rosy cheeks. Cupping the rim of his face with her palm.

“R… Raymond?” She called for. “Please…”

Luffed in his bitter amounts of loss. He could only say 1 word.

“Fire… fire… fire…”

Cracking open some grog. Bascone’s genius thought it be a wise decision to become plastered. Piling up cans which Raymond would usually throw at him, telling him to clean his shit. Just remained. While watching a game of England vs France in some soccer match. Each time England scored, he would throw a can.

“Wh… what’s… up with you… Raymond?”

Raymond failed to catch his drunken sentence. Only remarking while walking past.

“Fire… fire… fire…”

His heart burned. Crumbling in on itself. Like the very house Haffel’s sister torched.

“Ryan… please…”

He slumped over. Falling onto his neck beside the couch’s rest like a skeleton. Emptied of hopes and dreams. Throughout his skull. A thick, fuzzy illness sprung outwards. Engulfing his brain. Before Bascone turned around, Raymond spat out his legs. Covering the carpet.

“By good golly what on earth is wrong Raymond?”

“Fire…” Raymond continued stating. “Fire… fire… fire…”

Chapter 24: Cheer Me Up

Alone, he fixated upon the tempered breeze. Shining rays of sand across his heels. Drowned within the sand, it coated his bare feet. Straining closer to his toes was the wet, salty water. Slowly engulfing his stance. Each flicker back and forth like a tennis match. He couldn't pinpoint where the beach was. Nor where in New South Wales he was. Wind faded through his face. As the sun descended. So too did what had been known from before. Like a father he hadn't had before. Which is how he almost viewed his best friend.

Clamp! Clamp! Clamp!

Raymond's head tilted around. Feeling frozen down by the lengths of air gushing around his forehead. There, his eyes widened.

"R… Ryan…"

When he approached slowly. Raymond reached out with his hands. And in sheer bro hood, held him tight.

"Ryan… thanks for returning…"

"No…"

Raymond's embrace crumbled as Raymond stepped back.

"What do you mean no? Aren't we best friends since forever? Will you… forgive me for… Haffel?"

Ryan's figure stood still. Mechanising into that of an empty, shadowed silhouette.

"What if it was your mother? Would it be the same? Would it haunt your memory forever and ever?"

As he believed it to be friendly. Raymond's grief slowly and surely enveloped him once more. When the thought of Jodie, engulfed in flames. Pushed him through the mud. He cried,

"N... no..."

Ryan's entire body then began disintegrating into sand. Raymond held on. Begging and pleading.

"No please Ryan!" Raymond cried, trying to hold on. "Haffel! She's innocent! Please forgive me!"

Ripping away, starting with his eyes. A breeze knocked away his head. Exposing his neck. Then it was gone too. Left in the dust, only his torso remained. Before it faded way too. Raymond cried. Deeply saddened, he pleaded. But yet over and over. Nothing was achieved.

"Ryan! Stay with me! Ryan!" Raymond shouted.

By the time his feet eroded away. Once more, Raymond was left alone. Destined to wander, never by Ryan's side anymore.

Sudden knocks abruptly drew moths towards the flame of the moment. Out on his porch. Haffel tried to get in.

“Hello… Raymond? Bascone?” She tried to alert.

After a few metallic clambering from the inside. She knew it was Bascone by the door. Opening the door up, she was greeted by him still plated in armour. Brushing his teeth that were begging for a clean.

“Hey there Haffel.” Bascone invited in.

“Where is Raymond?” She worryingly asked. “He… he isn’t at school and I snuck out of school grounds to check on him…”

“He’s been in his bedroom for the past few hours.” Bascone dropped the news. “I don’t know what’s happened to him but it’s as if he hasn’t woken up at all.”

“It’s… around big lunch!” Haffel scurried off, worried. “Raymond! Raymond!”

From the entry way into the home, Haffel stormed up to Raymond’s door. Knocking and pleading for him to be awake.

“Raymond!” Haffel muttered, frustratingly. “Come out Raymond! Please!”

The knocking didn’t work. Or make things better. The more she banged, the more the household cat sneered

and snickered. Eventually, she unlocked the door. The sight see saw was a mess to say the least. Dark, decrepit. Binds were folded completely. Not an ounce of sunshine in his bedroom apart from the broken window Bascone smashed a long time ago. There, Raymond laid. Untouching of the real world. Haffel sprinted to his bed side. Checking for any signs of life. Thankfully so, Raymond robotically manpowered his eyes over to her.

“Ha… Haffel?”

“Raymond it’s me Haffel… you haven’t responded to any of my texts…”

Then, the pair went silent. Unable to speak, Haffel spoke for him.

“You… you lost the world, all of it just, for… me?”

In a silent, devoid of any emotion. He patterned.

“It… wasn’t right to… treat you like this… but what if, it had been… mom…”

Haffel lays down for a moment. Holding him with his back to her chest.

“I… I don’t know…” she responded dispossessed. “Would you… be able to… show empathy?”

“…”

Rising from her hugging, she walked out into the living room. There, Valerin had Bascone firmly tightened into a handcuff. Plastering a bag over his head. She noticed.

“Oh Haffel…” Valerin came up with an excuse. “We were just… bonding…”

Releasing Bascone, he rose up for the occasion.

“He’s been like this since yesterday.” Bascone noted.

Returning, Haffel once more checked on Raymond. In a cold sweat, she mentioned.

“I will never, ever leave your side…”

Holding him tight, she wished for him to get better. Until…

“Fire… fire… fire…”

She cried a tear of sadness. Knowing exactly what he was stuttering.

“Please… Raymond…”

Taking one more walk into the living room. She had found Valerin attempting to drag an unconscious Bascone. Too bad for her, the armour straps had to go. Due to the noise of his armour. She stared, confused once more.

“Do you guys have any tissues…?”

Bascone then awoke; in a state of delirium, he stared at Haffel.

“For some reason I’ve been blacking out lately… must just be the lack of frogs in my diet…” Bascone stopped, then paused. “Oh ah… the sink is that way…”

Haffel returned. Placing a box of tissues along with Raymond.

“This… reminds me of… my home…” Haffel mentioned, raising her eyes to the darkness of the room’s cave. “Hey… Raymond… don’t you think Valerin and Bascone have been… acting weird lately?”

“No… not really…”

Once more, they rested. Alone. Until Raymond turned around. Staring Haffel directly in the eye. He held her closer.

At a playground. Raymond remembered how he met him. Playing in the sand at their old primary school. The pair had more friends, whose faces were no longer seen anywhere. Playing by a swing set, he can hear the chirping of swings grinding up and down. Children

rocked the platforms numerous times. Feeling like they are at the top of the world. Beside Raymond, Ryan stood. Trying to hang out with him once more, ended in disaster. For the air disappeared. As the memory shattered into a mirror's glass.

"Goodbye… forever… murderer lover…"

Chapter 25: Everyone Looks Like Me!

Excited in line, the pair of Valerin and Bascone joined hands. Waiting patiently for the lineup to dwindle in number. Valerin took immense joy pointing out others in the crowds. Some were fellow knights like he. And Others cosplayed as wizards. By the time they signed the books and showed off their flashy tickets. The pair were greeted by

“Hazzar wonderful princess!” The ticket lady introduced herself. “Have you come out with your knight in shining armour?”

“Yeah… I hope we can see many figures… like… The King of Eng…”

She paused, hoping Bascone didn’t notice. But it was too late.

“That idiot king is here?” Bascone spat.

“No, I meant of France Bascone… the King of France…”

Suddenly, towards Bascone’s left an almighty dragon raised its eyes at him. Causing him to spin out and unleash his sword.

“Get away Valerin!” He shouted in a furious huff. “Dragon!”

Clasping him away, Valerin noticed as security approached the pair.

“Do you have your license booked for your blade mate?” Security eyed him up.

“Oh yeah… Bascone we have to…”

“Do you know you have dragons around here!?” He shook.

“Yeah… we have plenty… they don’t eat people though I’m afraid…” security answered back.

Upon entering the festival. His hopes were lifted. Bascone could blink and, within seconds, be back home in France. They enjoyed the sun set. Dimming to mid-day. He slowed his pace. Gently tugging Valerin as breaths of fresh air filtered his lungs. For the first time in ages, he cried a tear.

“Valerin… I… I have found my own people…”

She combed a gently smile. Keeping close to him whilst poking up her glasses. Their bliss was however shortly interrupted.

“Wow… check this guy out.”

A group of what appeared to be travellers approached Bascone and Valerin. Admiring the authentic outfit that the all-mighty Bascone pranced.

“Dude… that’s a sick costume…” one uttered, sporting elf ears.

“You call this a costume?” Bascone hulled to the side, cracking his nut. “I’ve killed several English under the crown of France I shall not let you compare me to a jester! I shall have them pointy ears cut off and eaten for lunch!”

Pulling out his sword, the group didn’t take him seriously.

“Wow he even sounds French…”

Nearby, another dragon approached. Hissing and blowing from some speaker. Spooking him into fleeing and surrendering.

“Get away from me you freak!”

“Wow he is French…”

Calmed down at a bench. Valerin continued to spill more beans as to the identity of the costume bearers.

“Bascone… listen. Nobody here is a dragon. Everyone is dressing up…”

“Like that heretic over there?” Bascone paused.

“Yes… it’s a festival, like for instance Halloween…”

“But… I don’t get it… there are stands for even the Holy Roman Empire… like what state does it represent? The Germans, The slightly angrier Germans? The even more angry Germans? The Germans with humour… wait that doesn’t exist…”

“Well of course they don’t exist… the only thing Germans are good at are following orders…” she slipped in nonchalantly.

Valerin paused for a bit. Realising what she said.

“Look, it’s just some people pretending to be from the Holy Roman Empire…”

In that moment, Valerin caught from the wind of her eye, what appeared to be 2 men adorning repair man clothing.

“See Bascone… not ever…”

Within their grasp, a toolbox. Screwing in the demands of her master. Nercea. From the box grew voices. Louder and louder by the second.

“You are my toolbox. If I want a screwdriver, I will get a screwdriver, If I want a hammer and nail, I shall take a hammer and nail. And just like a toolbox, if you become broken, I shall just throw you away and buy a new one…”

Playing in her head repeatedly, over and over. It almost broke her. Until.

“Wait Valerin look!”

From the corner of his eye. A holy order, that of the Knight’s Templar emerged in his vision.

“My oh mighty I wonder how they have delt with the Turks!?”

Approaching them from afar, Valerin was dragged along by a tightrope. There he planted himself beside the empty stand.

“Well oh God oh mighty!” Bascone planted himself besides the tent. “Well, isn’t it the good old Templars… tell me… how have you been surviving?”

The man previously working on shining tools shat himself upon hearing Bascone’s loud, ferocious voice. Adjusting his glasses, the larper quietly remarked to him.

“Sorry… but I don’t take roleplay that seriously. But if you’re interested in those who take said thing seriously, I’d be happy to recommend you to the St George tent just across from us.”

Bascone’s self-impulse then turned him around. Cladding his helmet, he saw that flag fly in the sky. That of England. St George’s cross flew high. Representing all the longbows and fallen horses that couldn’t press through the mud. Beside him, the Templars had a trusty

fire torch. Adding a lot more of a design choice. But to him, it was an opportunity.

“No… I have a better idea… I call it, Chevauchée…”

From the terror of Valerin’s eyes, her date was going downhill rather fast. Walking over there like the Terminator. Within a few feet his stance flaunted that of the till owner. Towering over the grass, his footsteps were heard.

“Well, oh my… what a lovely torch you have there…” The larper played his character.

Bascone, within range, flung his hand back a bit. Just before he could throw…

Buzz!

“E… eletri…cal… powers!!!”

Bascone’s entire helmet conducted the electrical impulse of Valerin’s taser. Causing him to collapse to the floor. Dropping the torch.

“That was… a close one.”

Wiping away her princess sweat. She did as she usually did. Realising she has a chance to kidnap him, but it was already too late by the time she came around to do it.

“Lady’s and Lords! I’m your host for today’s jousting!”

As the crowd’s banter was raised, Bascone’s confusion as to the whereabouts of the voice halted. When Valerin pointed to the speaker.”

“So… are we being spoken to via a… speaker?”

“Someone is using a mic…” Valerin explained. “I think they’re in that soap box.”

Soon, Bascone’s excitement raised as what emerged onto the field was none other than a Spaniard. Adorning the armour and prestige, flowing through his goldilocks garment. Crusted upon his chest remarked the valiantly staunch Castile. Dismounting his headgear, he waved into the crowd.

“Alright… a real man.” Bascone proudly proclaimed.

From the other corner however, Bascone’s cladded attire would slowly turn. Revealing what appeared to the banner of England. Riding in all arrogant fashion. It was in fact what he dreaded. An Englishmen. Wrapped in the red cross and white background. Better yet, the crowd of spectators roared in a cheer. Something he didn’t take lightly.

“Foolish English!” He shouted, unable to be heard.

To pour smoking fire over the wound. The Shmuck was handed some Bluetooth mic. As he continued to rave,

“I am the greatest of all English knights!” The man proclaimed. “He doesn’t even have a mic!”

“I don’t need one!” The Castilian replied. “No need to speak to some idiot like you!”

The only one who cheered him on, turned and spun around. Bascone was alone. Sitting down, the pissed off duke frowned in his seat. The surface began to bubble with something vile underneath. Riding closer to Bascone’s stand, the Englishmen had noticed Valerin. Wearing her ruby red glasses dressed as a princess. Wearing a smugly sly smirk. His fingertips strayed out towards her.

“As to you four eyes! I could easily beat that knight sitting firmly by your side!”

Shaking his metallic fist. Valerin quickly circled around her bag to find some way to subdue Bascone. By the time he strode off from his chair. Valerin realised her taser was out of battery.

“No… no Bascone!”

Coming down from the stands, Bascone shouted,

“Oi! Ya bloody English pig! How about you fight a real knight!”

Racing down the stairwell, he jumped onto the pitch. Squaring up on the knight. Soon, they heard,

“Wow wow wow! This is not a part of the program! I repeat! This is not a part of the program!”

Raising his sword, he forgot one thing…

Having his ass handed to him by security. Valerin watched from behind as an unconsciousness Bascone was thrown to the pavement outside the event. She, like the caring woman she was becoming. Raced towards Bascone’s feeble state. However, as security left. Bascone awoke from his head injury.

“Are you alright?” Valerin asked.

“He… he broke your honour…”

Expecting her to belittle him. He had been surprised when Valerin’s once worried stare sharply turned to laughter.

“You did that all for me?” She tried not to laugh. “You’re just… so… sweet but… stupid…”

Her laughing however subsided. She grabbed Bascone’s arm.

“Come on… we fucked up…” Valerin alluded to.

“But… Valerin… did you enjoy your time?”

She smiled before adjusting her glasses. Gesturing a small nod.

“Come on… let’s get you back home.” Valerin forgot the toolbox behind.

“Hey… thanks Valerin. I haven’t really been saying this but. You bringing me there, made me feel like at home. If not temporarily.”

“I… I hope you can stay with me…”

Getting into her car, she started up some smooth jazz as they forgot the events that transpired.

Chapter 26: Cheer Up Mate

Departing from the way he came. Bascone had to leave Valerin to her, totally not suspicious duties. Upon entering Raymond's home, he gently backed away in fear from the meowing cat who hadn't been fed.

"Here… kitty… kitty… kitty… ah… Haffel!? Raymond!?" Bascone shouted into the mushroom cave. "This cat thing is on me!"

However, his mouth would be pulled shut upon hearing someone's tears. Bascone turned to the couch. And there, a crawled-up ball of flesh and tears. Mopped silently in pain.

"H… Haffel?"

Shifting his feet closer towards her. Bascone met her by the couch.

"Wh… what's wrong Haffel?"

She lifted her face. All covered in mucus and bursting tears.

"It's Raymond… eh… he…"

"He hasn't left his room? Hadn't he?"

Trying to zip tie her tears. Haffel gently nodded.

"There's nothing I can do to make him feel better…"

He observed her, hunkered over in what can only be described as pure despair. Long before this all, he would have considered her a witch. Yet, he could see something within her. Empathy…

“Raymond… he… ever since his friends left… and… cut him off...”

“Yes… I can see.” Bascone nested beside her.

“I hate seeing him like that he… he’s what I used to be. A shell…”

Moments would pass as the pair seek their own asylum.

“I was scared for the first few days of me living here… the night was sheer terror. I was hungry… starving… no one would take me as a mercenary nor as a skilled warrior. But he opened his heart to me.”

“I was alone and terrified too… but… Raymond tried all he could to give me a good life…”

In a rare moment, Bascone lent her his hand. She squeezed that metallic glove. Hard, enjoying all she could get from it.

“Promise me… I’m sorry for how I treated you before witch…”

“And… I’m sorry as well… Bascone…”

Taking off his helmet, he smiled.

“Let us… unite… for Raymond’s sake…”

Just like that, he prepared himself to face Raymond.

Raising garlic and a cross in hand, Bascone entered the room which Raymond dwelled in. Surrounding the room in holy water extract. Bascone breathed slowly, trying not to upset the spirit within Raymond anymore. Around his neck, the layer of garlic eroded a smell of sour dough. Filtering the air in its scent. Then, Bascone steadily approached.

“Leave the body of Raymond behind!” He chanted, repeating himself. “All be gone at once!”

Waiting for the demon festering in Raymond’s body to burst out. He stood right beside Raymond. Watching the clock strike by. Suddenly,

Roll!

Ahh!

Thud!

In the process of rolling over, Raymond got the full force of Bascone’s bible plummeting into his face. A surge of pain followed as Raymond rose up from his slumber. Covering the red spot with his hand.

“Wh… what was that for!?”

“I… I tried exorcism…”

Raymond resumed circling his eyes in an awful motion before laying down in bed.

“I’m not possessed.” Raymond answered his stupidity. “I just… can’t go on… without Ryan…”

Ruffling off the garlic necklace. Bascone’s bottom slightly rocked the mattress as he sat beside the deeply sick Raymond.

“Ryan? Who… actually was he?” Bascone remarked.

“Everything… if the world turned grey, he would make it blue. If I was alone, he was there… it didn’t matter how others felt towards me.”

The pair sat still in silence, as Bascone tried all he could to make Raymond feel any better.

“He’s in my dreams… he’s in my thoughts… I could never…”

“But it’s gone now.” Bascone replied, digging deeper. “He left your side, but why?”

“Because… because… I cared for Haffel…”

Leaving his words alone, Bascone paused. Trying to cure his madness.

“You know, Raymond… even through what I’ve done, you mean so much to me. What you’ve done, has helped me immeasurably. You allowed me to stay here with you. I was terrified without you. But thank you Raymond…”

Tip toeing across the carpet. Haffel made a stray move like Raymond’s cat. She closed her eyes. Opening up her heart in the process.

“Without you, I wouldn’t have my friends… all I need, is you, Bascone and Valerin…” Haffel cried.

Seeing the pair join around him. Holding hands with the same bonding strength which drove Raymond and Ryan together. It was once more, present. Different people held the bonds high. Within a few flutters of his blinking, they finally said it.

“We won’t throw you away Raymond…” Haffel remarked with her chest.

“Please, for all it’s worth… be our friend… grow with us… thank you for everything Raymond.” Bascone finished, with a sly tear.

Raymond’s eyes slightly lifted up. Filling his heart with hope.

“Thanks guys… I… I never realised it… it will take a while to recover but… thank you all…”

Under the covers, a gently breeze shakes the room. Opening and folding the needle tight curtain. Hovering over his bed, he had been lucky the pair of Haffel and Bascone rebooted his brain. Neglecting his body's needs. He had been starving. Prior to this, Bascone watched in sympathy as he slumped to the kitchen, ignoring his cat to grab a bowl of cereal. The only meal he had in over a day. Laying on his mattress, Bascone reflected on his time here. The fright he earned from Raymond's cat. The woman he fell in love with. It all came back to him.

"It… it's been over… a year has it not?" Bascone thought hard. "I should ask Raymond if he needs to drink. I do pray myself he's improving from the demons attacking his body…"

Rolling over, slumping onto his dirty pillow by this point. Bascone asked,

"Do you need some drink?"

His answer received no signal at first. But upon waiting, Raymond circled back. Saying with the tenacity of a sick animal,

"No… I'm… alright."

Slumbering under his blanket, he imagined how much stress the others must have been in. Haffel came to mind. As her pleading fermented. Over by a window, Raymond could see a looming figure. Beside his bed, a window

clear as day overlook the lovely neighbourhood. The figure squatted. Creating a chirping whistle.

“There… there…” He remarked. “You found it…”

The man elongated his arm, shooting out pigeons as he watched.

“Sir Bascone will soon march on you know?” Adam finished his stay.

Vanishing into the night sky with the whip of cigarette smoke. Adam was no longer seen.

Chapter 27: Let Go Of The Pain

Gently swaying her hips towards Raymond. Haffel's full on hydrophobia kicked in as the emerging summer, drew away all the frost. Sitting beside Raymond, she slung her arm around his shoulder. Realising how his depression hadn't yet fully subsided.

"H… how's it been?" Haffel started conversation.

"You've told me that many times today."

"Oh…" Haffel didn't realise. "I just… want you to get better."

"Being a broken record only gets you so far." Raymond turned his head and smiled. "Thanks anyways… but where is Bascone?"

"Apparently he's in the changing room." Haffel explained. "But I have no idea what he's doing?"

"I don't know Haffel… maybe it's in the name?"

A few seconds later, came the walking and talking mouth of Bascone. His armour set didn't comply with dress codes at all. Especially at the local pool. As he walked, he uttered,

"Aye eye Sire! Sir Bascone on dut…"

Slip!

Splash!

Raymond suddenly pounced onto his feet. Rushing over to Bascone who, like a dumbass, thought it be a good idea to wear heavy armour underwater. Overlooking him, Raymond tried pulling Bascone out of the water. However, he was fine. All he needed was a thumbs up. Which he gave to the pair worried he was gonna drown.

Leaving the water behind him, Bascone waded to the other side of the pool. Now in the shallow end. He raised his helmet off the corner of his head. Turning to Haffel and Raymond, who had terror and shock on their face. He smiled.

“Bascone you idiot!” Raymond shouted in horror. “You could have drowned!”

“Yet again, I live!”

Haffel face palmed. Annoyed how foolish he had acted.

“That’s why I don’t like water.” Haffel stumbled off.

“Hey Raymond.” Bascone pointed. “We might need to switch pools, but you see those pool noodles over there?”

He turned his head in the direction Bascone pointed.

“What about them?”

“Wanna sword fight?”

He thought about it for a bit, but he became steadily worried with consequences aching down his neck.

“It may lift your spirits.” Bascone slowly approached. “Come on… this is what true Frenchmen do after all…”

Picking up his noodle, he headed towards Raymond whose body still waded within the water. Looking over towards another pool, Bascone spotted the kid’s pool. Then, he pointed like how the crew on Christopher Colombus’ ship pointed to land.

“Over here!” Bascone announced.

“Fine… just as long as we don’t get into trouble.”

Hopping into the kid’s pool. One which was rather shallow. By now, they had already gained the attention of the confused lifeguards. As Raymond raised his coffee blues eyes, he saw Bascone. Standing like a stone wall. Happy to partake in this affair.

“Get ready to fight a real knight!” Bascone announced bluntly.

Like the real spy she was, Valerin positioned herself upon a hilltop. Adorning her suntan cream and peach yellow bikini. Despite it being a pool summer day, she felt it necessary to have her hair done. Turning her head,

her sunglasses raised slightly. Spreading his feet, Raymond flicked his wrists.

“Let’s get this done and over with.”

Charge!

Bascone full-on sprinted towards Raymond. Swinging endlessly as Raymond hopelessly tried to parry any blow. Ducking towards the water, Raymond dodged a hit before striking Bascone’s helmet. It might have done little damage to an entire fucking set of armour. However,

“Ahh shit!” Bascone shouted, frantically trying to wipe his eyes. “My eyes! What is this!?”

Trying to wipe his eyes, he had to open his headgear. Or else the chlorine would wear away at his 15th century face. Crawling a sly smile, Raymond shoved Bascone to the ground. Making his helmet fall into the water.

“Hey!” Bascone shouted.

Whistle!

The pair anchored their eyes to shore as one pissed off lady lifeguard shouted,

“Get the fuck out of the pool!”

Bascone tilted slightly to the side, giggling to himself because a woman told him what to do.

“Why should I listen to you!?” Bascone muttered.

“Leave or else!”

Prancing his armoured plate gloves to his side. He exclaimed,

“You can’t tell Sir Bascone what to do woman.”

“You’re smacking each other in the kids pool!” The woman barked back. “You can’t hit each other!”

Bascone than fired back,

“Yeah well, watch me!”

Rotating his hind legs, a child who had been unlucky enough to have floated near him emerged. Raising the pool noodle, he charged over to them to Raymond’s shock.

Strike!

Waahh!

In one hit, the child started to cry. Emptying more tears into the pool full of piss.

“Get the fuck out!” The woman cried once again.

“Jeez Bascone, I knew it was a horrible idea but… I think you got us banned…”

Living in his inner French arrogance, Bascone patted him on the back.

“Don’t threat it, Raymond.” Bascone curled. “Swimming pools don’t like me anyways.”

“How many swimming pools have you been kicked out of?” Raymond questioned him.

“109 swimming pools to be exact.” Bascone returned the favour.

“109?” Raymond’s eyes couldn’t believe. “Bascone don’t bullshit me. You have been here for 2 years now. And if you’re not lying, maybe the banning is… you’re… fault…”

“Today’s been fun, hasn’t it?” Bascone remarked.

“Apart from that then… yeah…”

Coming out of the woodworks, Valerin had Haffel tail her over towards the car. Carrying her beach bag, containing lotion, sunscreen and possibly all assortments of spy gear. Observing her car, Raymond began to realise just how luscious her vehicle was. Its rims were already done up. Having the base parts on the outside look like it came straight from the dealership. Raymond got into the car, buckled with Bascone in the back.

“Hey… Valerin?” Raymond raised a question. “This car is kinda nice; how did you afford this?”

Suddenly, the hair upon the back of Valerin's neck raised. She remained silent for a bit. Staring off to any sort of business on the street where she could claim to have worked.

"Well ahh…"

Looking at one of the corner shops, she noted a big sign reading Sydney Pawn shop.

"Oh, you know, I work in some pawn…"

"Porn?" Haffel looked at her suspiciously. "Do you do porn?"

"N… no I!"

"What's this… porn thing Haffel just mentioned?" Bascone asked.

"It's like videos and…" Haffel abruptly stopped.

"I don't do porn!" Valerin bluntly shouted. "It's… I work with my dad who… owns a pawn shop in Sydney."

Everyone in the car went silent until Bascone stated,

"I'd do porn if it's just videos…"

Scuffing at what he said, Valerin turned up the radio to any bubble pop she could find.

Turning to the night sky, the group of 4 waited in line at their local operating movie theatre. Rolling over the red carpet. Bascone had been annoyed that he was forced to wear some actual formal clothes. So he didn't appear like some oddball once faced with crowds. Watching the lineup for tonight's gathering slowly fly down the panel like a scroller. The group debated for a bit. Discussing what type of movie they'd like to see.

"Hey, wanna go see Grownups paradise?" Raymond turned to Valerin and Bascone.

"I'm not in the mood for any comedy." Valerin huffed about.

"How about we do like… a group thing."

Haffel turned to Raymond, insinuating her desire to not watch a horror film.

"I… I hate horror… It makes me feel… squeamish… and…"

She dived into Raymond's chest. Hoping to hide her eyes from the movie poster. One which pierced through her heart.

"Me and Haffel will watch Grownups paradise… you guys watch whatever…"

Bascone's slightly overheard a pair walking out of the movie theatre. One was dressed in a fine blue jumper, the

other in some hot topic uniform. Coming from the movie theatre showing The Beacon That Fell… a really great book you should TOTALLY…. anyways, Hunkering down in their movie seat. Bascone took to the popcorn. Immediately transferring half of it into his gut. Watching the ads roll and the movie finally flash. The intro seemingly was funnier than expected. Valerin was tired out of her mind. So, as she sucked on her Pepsi drink. It seemed like she was on life support. Giving out one big yawn. She waited for the blood and guts to roll.

“This shit is boring…” Valerin turned to Bascone.

“Yeah, but I like it… you said there was more, murder death, correct?”

Her mind was at ease until, she wasn’t.

“Give me the tickets…”

Crumble! Crumble!

“Oh fuck… we’re in the wrong theatre…”

Upon witnessing the decapitation of some man, squished between a truck and a hard place. Such a surge of adrenaline drummed up Haffel’s puny heart. Watching the blood made it worse. She then bounced out of her chair. Waving around before,

Ahh!

Sprinting full force out of the movie. Raymond followed from behind.

Now all alone, Valerin and Bascone took to a nice and fancy spot. Overlooking the city like one of those old, cheesy horror movies. Coming to mind, the memory of Raymond going about his next play came to mind. Then, he was thinking.

“Wait… Valerin…” Bascone remembered. “Remember the play I partook in?”

“Well… yeah I do…”

“Why weren’t you a part of that Valerin?”

Once more, she raced to conclusions.

“I was working sorry.” Valerin came up with right on time. “But what are you proposing?”

“Wanna be in his next play?” He asked politely. “Raymond is looking for a pretty princess.”

Raising her eyes, a flutter overwhelmed her. Pulling a happy smile, she ignored that dark vehicle behind her. Just staring…

“S… sure…”

Chapter 28: Where Can I Sign Up?

Pressing her smoking lips, Valerin took her time preparing herself before knocking her Marie Antoniette ass on the door. Fanning her face, she waited for the door to make way for her. Soon, came the approaching reach of Jodie. Upon seeing Valerin, Jodie's face lit up in a smile perceived through a rainbow. Having coffee cup in hand, Jodie allowed her in.

"Well, oh my, look who decided to swing by on a weekend like this." Jodie pronounced. "How was last night?"

"Fantastic, it really was." Valerin cheered. "I wanna chat with your son Raymond about a play he's putting together."

"Oh, he's hard at work again, is he?" Jodie made way for Valerin. "He's in the garden with Haffel out back."

Leaving Jodie's sight, Valerin took to the backyard to see Haffel calmly planted in Raymond's lap. She had 1 hand over his shoulder. Her other holding onto the swing set. Raymond's occasional gusts of nerves steadily dragged his heels. Shifting the sands below. As Valerin approached, the pair looked up at her.

"So, I hear you're planning a play fairly soon." Valerin smiled.

"Yeah… we're in need of a princess character." Raymond made fairly clear.

“Bascone talked all about it. And from last night, it… just got me hooked onto the idea of being in a play. Not that I have experience.”

“Don’t worry, if Haffel can do it. So can you.”

Haffel’s shy face turned away, exposing a gentle smile. Allowing Raymond’s words to flow through the air.

“We did alright, didn’t we?” Raymond strayed his hands through Haffel’s scalp.

“It was hard but, I did it.” Haffel turned back to Valerin. “Don’t fear, we will work hard… as hard as… hard and… hard?”

Grabbing the playwright sheet. Raymond returned swiftly to get Valerin to write down her participation.

“Better yet, Bascone is meant to be the main prince to your princess character.” Raymond realised. “A couple playing a couple, how lovely.”

Valerin could see the name of the play. Titled Sir Bascone of Orleans, she wondered how much of a character she needed to play. Curling a smile, Valerin proclaimed.

“You know, I’m such a great actor. You wouldn’t know if I’m like… some spy trying to kidnap Bascone. Not that I ‘am of course. That would be crazy.”

“R… right…” Haffel appeared confused. “Anyways, I’ll let Bascone know you’re on the team.”

“Speaking of Bascone, where is he?” Raymond looked around.

Hopping over a fence line, Bascone stumbled through an open bush. Straying towards the horrified Raymond, Haffel and Valerin.

“Oh, my dear what on earth?” Valerin rushed over to help. “What happened?”

“Tried to shag the neighbours.” Bascone replied. “Too bad guard dogs exist.”

Lights, cameras, and paused action. Behing the stage, Valerin was doing up her hair to impress Bascone. Predicting that leaving a whole bottle of wine unsupervised was a smart idea. Bascone just so happened to have made his way drunkenly up the stage.

“Wh… what happened?” Raymond turned to Bascone.

“Had just a little to drink before tonight.” Bascone turned.

Stumbling over, Valerin was there to close the gap. Ensuring that he did not fall onto a hard wooden floor. But instead, her boobs.

“How much was a little?” Valerin cuddled Bascone.

“A bottle. Maybe some mouth wash.”

Hearing Raymond visibly annoyed, he approached while Haffel kept to the shadows. Feeling an innate urge to stay, however. Valerin wanted to move. Maybe today was the day. Yet, all she wanted to do was hold him. Slipping her hands onto his back. Valerin slipped her hands into the trusty handbag. Placing a tiny sober pill through his teeth. He rapidly regained much cognition required within a few minutes of holding.

“Is he alright?” Haffel soon flocked to his side.

“Bascone just needs some rest.”

Valerin tried moving to her secret exit. Yet again and again, her body refused. All she wanted was, *~warmth.*

“Please, come on… Bascone…” Raymond bit his teeth thinking. “I swear, if you bail on me, I will be pissed.”

Soon, the curtain flashed. Ready for this round. Bascone stood on a high note. Following an enthusiastic cheer. Everyone watched him appear from a smokescreen.

“Hello crowd of tonight’s play! My name is Bascone of Orleans! Or as I’m formally known as, Sir Bascone. I,

behold to you a tale of a real knight! This is my, slightly exaggerated story!”

Guiding his head to the side, some random bush person came spraying in from some reach. Turning tail, Bascone ran like a coward. Screaming as the crowd cheered and laughed. Within the fall of a feather. Valerin strode up on stage. Pressing a firm comb to her hair. A fine tub of lipstick came out clean with the glamour of a runway. Tapping her fine high heels to the floor. Valerin turned her gaze to the audience.

“And I am a loyal, humble princess. Destined to marry the one man of my dreams.”

Giving it her all, Raymond backstage felt impressed. From the corner of her eye, Haffel adorning a long grey beard and a cloak dripping to the floor flocked to her.

“Well hello dear.” Haffel put on her best old man accent. “You claim to be loyal. If as such, how many dates have you went on?”

“Well, I might have… slept with a couple of guys…”

Flick!

Behind her emerged from the darkness a row of guys. All hiding inside lampshades. Bringing a sly smile to Raymond’s face. Slowly veering her awkward face back to Haffel, Valerin remarks,

“Well, perhaps if I can have a run in tonight. Things may change.”

“Don’t fear!” Haffel proclaimed, waving around a staff. “I will ensure you shall find your man tonight.”

Next scene followed a bunch of student actors slow dancing in a ball formation. Tap dancing in the centre, Raymond made sure to give the crowd a fine light show. By the end, Valerin moved out of the group. Dropping a fake pair of underwear 10 sizes too large on the floor.

“Oh, glory to the one who picks me!” Valerin sang her heart out.

Suddenly, one of the men within the group holsters her hand. Calmly and flatly vibing along to the fine classical music, Raymond found on a copyright free website. As the pair danced, Haffel from behind the stage led some kid dressed as a goat out. Flattering her eyes. Valerin approached the goat. Excited, the pair rejoice as they stroke its head.

“Awe… it’s a pretty goat…” Valerin’s eyes flashed.

The goat then randomly rushes over to Valerin’s panties. Quickly picking them up, Valerin watched in disgust and horror. Clamping down her underwear, the guy turned.

“Ew… you wear 7XL underwear?” He coughs. “Who would wear something so big like that?”

Feeling shattered, Valerin would turn and slowly walk away. Putting up an amazing act in the process. One which got a thumbs-up from backstage. And an oscar.

Running out of frame as the curtain once more drops fine red. The goat released the underwear. Stumbling through a haze of crowded woods, Bascone confronted the goat head on. Whipping out his sword, Bascone went in for the kill. Slowly prancing up on the goat. As it ate grass, the student inside the goat costume somehow stood up on 2 legs. Presenting its arms in a karate fashion.

“Come out ya bloody!”

Wack!

Having his teeth knocked in, Bascone stumbled to the ground, to the laughing of the crowd. Slashing 2 more hits that missed, Bascone launched a steaming punch,

Punch!

All was well until the goat returned.

“How many times do I gotta sm…”

Wack!

Thundered in the gems. Bascone bent backwards in pain. Pretending to remain strong. The goat suddenly dropped the underwear stored in its mouth. Before running off. Confused by what they were, Bascone quickly picked them up before leering towards his side. Then, from the raft of the ceiling. Bascone looked up to see a fat black kid dressed as a pretty pink fairy, lower down slowly to the floor.

“I’m your fairy godmother!”

“Well, you don’t sound like one.” Bascone folds up his arms. “Could I get a wish though?”

“Sure thing.”

Bascone holds up the underwear to the kid’s face.

“Find me the darling who dropped this!”

Waving his wand, followed by a sprinkle of some powder. Valerin came running on stage like the princess she was. Stopping in front of Bascone’s impressive build. Valerin asks,

“Please… that’s my underwear…”

“You wear 7XL? Damn thought you were gonna be a fat bitch…”

Snapping to act 4, from behind. Bascone was already having his gears grinded against. Because the foul smell of actual hygiene and tea came into effect. And he was right. It was a bloody Englishmen. Bascone swiftly turned around. Approaching him, the man started to shake and shiver. Raymond, realising he might break several twigs and a half. Hid behind stage. Waiting. Yet Valerin kept hold of him. Keeping him in check.

“Bascone.” She politely whispered. “It’s just an actor, he’s not English…”

Suddenly regaining composure, Bascone turned to the man to hear his proposal to Valerin.

“Hello my dearest lady… I have come to perhaps take your hand in marriage…”

“Yeah, well I’m forklift certified…” Bascone won her over.

And with that, Valerin clung to Bascone. Faking her impressed demeanour. The curtains fell to the ground. As Raymond got ready for the ceremonial golden dance, he thought in his head.

“Please a least a pass… I like these but, I had a lack of time to prepare…”

Soon enough the curtains opened up once more. Valerin, keeping her dress, remained as pretty as ever. She

danced along with Bascone. Giving the show a topping limelight. In this joyous moment, she spots what appear to be men in black suits. Taking their leave from the crowd. Yet they were a flutter in comparison with the dance. Time slowed perfectly. As a brightly lit smile fell upon her. Which was until,

Zip!

Boom!

Some idiots either by accident or on purpose, had some firecracker like firework, enter through a doorway. Zooming under a row of seats before going off. Suddenly, the show ended. But Valerin ended up in the arms of Bascone who prevented her gracious fall. He looked at her, and she leered her eyes up to his gaze. Appearing as such like fluttering palm leaves on a summer day. It got to her. Once more she began to have that feeling…. Deep down it brewed fluffy lines of silk. Yet, unlike last time. This feeling didn't go away. Her heart continued beating. Not swaying away from her desire to remain like this. It connected, more and more did she realise. Stitching herself together, all the ideas, moments, laughs and deeply sown moments. Valerin opened her eyes. Used, manipulated by others around her. This wasn't fake. Nor an act. She reminisced all the times he held her tight. The times she tried but failed to kidnap him. As her face swept up under a red rug. She

could no longer deny it. It was ~*love*... not the fake lust written in modern slop novels from a certain Colleen Hoover. It was real. A push towards him. Separating herself away, she quickly rushed from Bascone. Eager to know what was up with her. Slamming open the bathroom door, one sly tear plummeted down her eye. Feeling the pink flutter down below. She let the pigeons fly. Looking in the mirror. She saw something no reflection of coffee could ever mimic. It was herself. Adorned in her thick layer of gold. Free. Raising a brutal fist. She plunged it through the open glass.

Smash!

Released from the dark, smoky abyss.

“I… I love him! I love you Bascone!!! Sir Bascone of… of… this here Sydney!!!”

Chapter 29: The Buzz Comes Clean

Taking no notice of Valerin's leave. Haffel started taking off her clothes from the play. Proud of another night of success. Equating to, a C-. Raymond popped by.

"Congrats Haffel…" Raymond lifted his hand upon her back. "This night was… amazing…"

Haffel turned, no longer the skittish witch who lived under a bridge.

"It was… I loved it too…" Haffel's dazzling eyes cooped up. "It can be kinda scary at times but… remember last year's?"

"What with the chickens?"

"Yeah… the chickens…" Haffel nodded.

"If it wasn't for those diapers those 'pigeons' would have been shitting everywhere."

Leaving with a smile, Haffel replied.

"I'm just going to the toilet…"

"Sure, don't worry… me and Bascone will wait."

Creak!

Haffel made her way to the stall next to a closed one. Now sat there behind closed doors. She could hear someone crying. Pressing her firm ears closer to the

wall. They were on the phone. Yet she could not mistake her voice. It was Valerin. Getting a talking from… some man…

“I’ve been getting some recent reports of you remaining slack whilst serving your duty and trying to kidnap Bascone!”

“I… I… I’m sorry it’s just hard to…” Valerin tearfully cries.

“They have been watching you for a while and this recent stunt you have pulled is the last straw! Like a fucking play!? Are you serious!?”

Wiping away her saddened tears. Valerin coughed on her spit before she is swept up once more by her master.

“No please I… I’m sorry… I’ll try to get him to Melbourne by the end of this week or so… please just…”

Haffel’s eyes widened. Despite her revelation. Her master’s grip has yet to have fallen. All eyes were now upon her. Shaking in a fearsome worry. She continued to hear his stern chew out.

“I’ve spent $50,000 just bouncing you from motel to motel. To car back to motel once more! Added by your wage of $200,000 you have done nothing but bleed me dry! You wanna know something!? This is for my

grandfather. If I don't get what I want it will be lost forever!!! But instead, you fucking play wild coyote with what? 5 million? You love him… don't you? Bring him to me… remember me… toolbox…"

Valerin ends the call. Stunted in her words, she cries out.

"I can't do it… I can't… break from… Nercea…"

Widening her eyes. Haffel's horrific realisation rocketed her off the toilet. Rushing over to the sink. She did the average rinse before sprinting over to Raymond and Bascone. Her faithful friends. Once she climbed the stairs in a swift panic, both Bascone and Raymond spun their head.

"Raymond! Bascone!" She cried. "Valerin! She's going to kidnap Bascone!"

At first a wave of confusion weaved over Raymond. Unsure to take her seriously.

"What's going on Haffel?" Raymond stepped over to her.

"Please listen please! I was in the bathroom when I overheard a conversation with Valerin and some guy over a phone call… please you gotta believe me…"

Her pleas ignited within Raymond a chain reaction. Remembering all the suspicious moments of her absence. Then, he remembered Valerin pulling Bascone into the woods. Trying to lead him into some pit. Haffel

as well, started recalling with her goldfish brain. Especially those times where Bascone was on the floor whilst Valerin tied him up. However, like usual. Bascone remained completely oblivious.

Tip! Tat! Tip! Tat!

Haffel and Raymond twisted their heads to the bottom of the stairs. Valerin, whose face appeared red. Licked clean of tears emerged. Gripping onto Bascone's arm. Valerin attempted to spin him away.

"No… we will come too…"

Valerin paused for some time. Keen to know why Haffel and Raymond gave her… that look… they stared at her. Peeling away the fabricated lies of her estate. As if she had been the one to have plunged the dagger into Caeser's back. As she walked off, Valerin could feel their gaze. Raymond, who was partly convinced. Whilst Haffel's dark magic and… autism… kept her eyes trained on her. Adamant of what she heard.

Arriving to a niche corner, Valerin extended her hand to her waist, whilst keeping Bascone clutched. Remembering the 2 teenagers tagging alone. Valerin turned around. Shaking with a sweat heaped face. She took to her fine leather jacket.

“Ah… you 2 are still with us…”

“Yeah, that’s right… we’re friends, aren’t we? We stick together, don’t we?” Raymond hid a hint of vulgar annoyance.

By the time Valerin started sweating bullets. She could see the light closing in on her. From 2 sides. The pair’s presence lifted the candle. Watching all the wax that was underneath. Twitching her eyes, and her ruby red glasses she proclaimed,

“Hey… guys… me and Bascone booked a taxi for only 2 people so you might…”

“My mom is here to pick us up… why don’t you come with Jodie? I thought you guys were best friends… are you not?” Raymond probed.

“Yes, we are but… me and Bascone specifically said…”

“I heard everything from the bathroom stall… all of it…”

Haffel shut her completely silent. Feeling a massive swallow on the horizon. Valerin clamped down on Bascone’s hand. And as Raymond’s eyes widened.

Dash!

Valerin suddenly made a remarkable get away. Storming off with Bascone in one hand. Haffel and Raymond raised their banner. Giving quick chase to the traitor.

“Give Bascone back to us!!!” Raymond shouted, quickly bridging the distance.

“I thought our wagon was here!” Bascone asked of Valerin. “Why are we running!?”

Sprinting around a corner, Valerin took a leap of faith. Running onto a busy intersection. She didn’t think twice about hitting the crossing button. Haffel, upon reaching the road, bounced back like a terrified cat. Watching her hiss and swerve. Raymond shouted,

“Follow me! I know another route!”

Haffel started to cry. Both frustrated this was the first bit of cardio she had done in a while. And that her best friend of 2 years, was being taken away. Down in the gutters. She ran as fast as she could beside Raymond. Yet within her, remained a shattered heart. To her, Valerin had been a woman to look up to. Beautiful, caring, interesting at parties. But to see her in this light made that peaceful heart crumble softly. Raymond came across a less busy road. Engaging with the traffic control lights. He soon bore witness to the ever so annoying buzzing used to alert blind folk. Above them, the green lights

flashed as Raymond sprinted across the road. Haffel tried but was dragged down by Valerin's betrayal.

"Why? Why would she… do this?" Haffel cried. "She wasn't… one of us?"

Remembering her sun kissed skin on that day her and Bascone walked together. Alone. Bringing a smile to Bascone's face. Her bubble pink chewing gum. The fragrance of her perfume and front seat. Just as a broken heart tore away. Was how Haffel felt about Valerin. A friend, turned bad…

"This… this can't be…" Haffel caught up to Raymond. "Please… don't tell me she's a bad person…"

Looming her head from corner to corner. Valerin calmed her breath as Bascone stretched.

"Why can't the others join us in the wagon?" Bascone remarked.

"Because they won't fit dear… don't listen to them…"

Taking a moment. Valerin swung her gracious arms around his waist. Pushing her smooth and soft hand to the back of his neck. Feeling the metal graze her grip. She was given a way out. By her king… Nercea Lionheart…

“Just wait here dear.” Valerin ordered. “Please, don’t go running off from me.”

“Run away?” Bascone replied, confused. “Why would I dip from my dearest Valerin?”

In sight, Bascone suddenly honed his eyes on 2 approaching figures. One of them, a gothic idiot, oh wait that’s Haffel. And the other had some red overcoat. They quickly watched the road before dashing across. Valerin swung her eyes around. And her pupils vanished into the pits of shock.

“Bascone!” Haffel cried, trembling to keep her voice still. “Bascone don’t leave us!”

“Get away from her!” Raymond roared towards Bascone.

Before Valerin could swoop Bascone from his heels, he stopped.

“Well hello there.” Bascone waved, walking closer. “Sorry but me and Valerin are…”

“Bascone please listen to us…”

Valerin tried and failed over and over. His grasp and mighty feet were far too powerful for a girl like her to control. Straying closer to Haffel and Raymond. Their words flowed from one ear, to the other.

“Bascone, you have to listen… Valerin she’s bad news…” Haffel huffed. “We have been chasing you for ages just to... tell you…”

“Bad?” Bascone titled his head in confusion. “What do you mean bad?”

Raymond’s mean glare fixated on Valerin. Who by all accounts adopted the moving capacity of a dancing cobra. Her legs shook in once place. And as they continued to tear down her lies. Valerin’s *~Thick* and *~nasty* tongue pulled him down.

“Don’t listen to them… listen to me…”

Then, just as anger overflowed across his face. So too did the tears flow. Valerin noticed it all. Raymond teeth chittered with sadness. Hoping no more bickering and betrayal would befall them. Yet here, he stared at the toolbox. Not a person. They weren’t just out for Bascone, but for her as well.

“What do you want with Bascone!?” Raymond desperately pried for answers. “This whole time, the friendly gestures. The time we spent as friends… DID THAT NOT MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU!!??”

Up above the grimly streets, began the pouring of gross rain. Gloomy, brewed from the darkest and blackest area of their hearts. Despite holding on. Under all the

calamity unfolding. Valerin herself also couldn't admit her time with them was fake. Bascone then slipped away.

Beep! Beep!

Out of nowhere, Jodie pulled up beside the pair of Haffel and Raymond. Worried her son hadn't arrived on time. Raymond and Haffel instinctively followed the horn. Whilst Bascone slowly peeled away. Raising her eyebrow. She called for him. However, under the ever-heaping rain. Nothing happened. Hearing the thud of Jodie's car door. And the rearing up of her engine. She indicated onto the road and sped off. Leering Valerin back to square one. Alone. What appeared from below, was her reflection cut into a puddle of water.

"Hey Raymond's mom." Haffel kept bickering. "This time of night calls for some Maccas."

"Well, we can't honey… I almost filed a missing person's report. What the fuck were you guys doing? And why was Valerin left alone?"

"She… she was… getting her own ride home." Raymond filled in the concrete.

"I don't get it… why on earth would she possibly want to kidnap me?" Bascone trampled over Raymond's work. "I'm too strong."

Facepalming. Raymond was at least happy to get home.

Chapter 30: Crossing The Boarder

Raymond couldn't hear the usual screams as his black cat meowed towards his door for a feed. He couldn't hear the faintest of slices as Bascone turned Jodie's bushes into sword targets. And thankfully, he couldn't hear the endless moaning of Valerin and Bascone on the couch. It was inner peace. Opening his eyes, Raymond experienced a sensation similar to Christmas as a child. Wiping his dry, sore and tired eyes. He could remember from last night his adventure turning from the front stage, to the blinding streetlights of inner Sydney. Just like Haffel's nightly gaming sessions involving at least 2-3 monsters. Black spots for bags illuminated from his face. Dragging his face around on his mattress. Once having the ability to move, Raymond lifted himself out of bed. Opening his door, the black cat leered its whiskers at him.

"Hello kitty…"

Yawn!

"Have you seen Bascone anywhere?"

Strolling through the home. He noticed just how empty it appeared. His mother headed off to work earlier than he had awoken. Yet, she didn't have a habit of leaving paper notices. Approaching the kitchen table. Raymond unfolded a letter. However, the deeper and deeper he followed. His heart sank even more,

“To Raymendo

English is stupid language. Anyways. Princess Valerintine woke me up to take me to her king. Glad I can meat him. He lives in land known as Melbougnea. By the time you have read this I be gone. Bye friend.

p.s sorry for pissing in the sink”

Rushing through his veins was the worry and concern of an overbearing chook. Feeling her broodiness fluctuates. Shaking visibly. His first instinct was to rush over to his phone. Calling her many times, soon enough she awoke.

“What time… is it?” Haffel yawned forwardly. “It’s early…”

“Bascone! It’s Bascone!” Raymond shouted.

“The time is Bascone?”

“No, he… he’s been taken by Valerin!”

Sudden tears of despair emerged from the pair. Creating a feedback loop of sadness. Opening the home’s door. Raymond made sure to lock the door from behind.

“I’m coming over!” Raymond sprinted down the street. “I have the letter he gave me!”

Running up her dilapidated stairs. Raymond knocked hard onto Haffel’s house door. She appeared, taking him in with a swift hand.

“What’s the letter.” Haffel seemed scared.

“This… right here…”

Joining together in their sorrow. They both showed a deepening wedge of pain. Having lost who, they bonded with. Bascone. Haffel only took a few minutes, glancing over any clues.

“I believe what he means by Melbougnea he might mean… Melbourne… Victoria.” Raymond acknowledged.

She slightly nodded at his assessment. Before resting her hand upon her face.

“Yeah but… how do we get to him?” Haffel remarked.

Deep in thought, Raymond launches himself onto Haffel’s bed. Feeling just how comfortable it really was. Her pillows smelt of her. Then, out of sheer instincts Haffel crawled up beside him. Suddenly, what emerge

was a warn, sensational cuddle from Haffel. Flicking off her hood, Haffel remarked,

“We were together for so long… but now look… we’re divided once more.”

“No… I don’t accept this Haffel.” Raymond turned around, pledging his hand across her face. “I will find a way to bring him back…”

Lighting up her candle waxed eyes. Haffel’s darling gaze lifted. Like that of a mined emerald. Perfectly shining within Raymond’s embrace. Yet she couldn’t help but to cry. Cartoonishly large bubbles of tears poured over the sowed seeds. Fornicating a mist of grief.

“What will she do to him?” She pleaded for an answer.

“I have no idea… until we see her again, I’m afraid he’s gone…”

Haffel’s crying started smooth and soft, later descended into a child-like banter. Destroyed over something so precious to her. After a moment or so passed, there were no more tears left to cry.

“Why!? Why!?”

Wah!

All he could do was hold her close.

“I promise you Haffel… we WILL see him again…”

Clasping her hands, the teacher of Raymond's economics class did the usual hyping up for any sort of class event. Buried deep in his desk. Raymond's eyes had failed to notice the teacher's ugly glare.

"Raymond?" She leered out his name.

Once he lifted his head. Raymond appeared as if he awoke when the roosters started crowing.

"Jeez… somebody didn't get much rest last night."

Drooping from his thick skull were bags so elongated. A mere passerby could accidentally trample upon them. Smelling that the teacher's coffee tainted breath was still near. He asked,

"Teacher… about our Darwin business trip…"

"Darwin?" She titled her head.

Faceplanting once more into his desk, he could remember still looking after Haffel post 3am until her Nintendo Copyright infringement DS ran flat.

"Well Raymond, the Japanese returned… we're not going to Darwin anymore." Her teacher's teeth lit up in a sweet voice. "Instead, the Owner of the firm has decided to switch plans, and we are now heading to Melbourne…"

“Head… head…ing to… heading to Melbourne?”

Raymond’s hands immediately rocketed him off his perch. Trying to listen through the air sirens.

“Wait… Melbourne?”

“Yeah… but it’s just for a few days. Remember it’s for the Business assessment. So, keep your best behaviour!”

Running back to Haffel’s place after school finished. He knocked heavily onto her door. Waiting for the witch to appear. Then the door opened. Either she had grew many figures, or it was her sister. Prancing her eyes at him with an evil glare. Having cigarettes in hand.

“What do you want?” Haffel’s elder sister asked.

Raymond stood frightened. Trying to place distance between her strangling hair.

“Is Haffel home?” Raymond looked back and forth behind her.

Emerging from behind was Haffel’s slumbering pace. Her sister looked back at Raymond. Suddenly removing herself from his presence.

“Whatever, have her…”

Leaving a trail of rudeness, her sister vanished into the witch's hut.

"Y… yes?" Haffel hid behind the door.

"It's only me Haffel, you don't have to be scared."

"Sorry she acted like that." Haffel calmed down. "She doesn't like to see new faces."

"Haffel." Raymond alerted her. "I'm going on a class trip to Melbourne."

"Class trip?" She questioned him. "But I'm not in your class."

"Can you switch class?" Raymond asked with a worried huff.

"I've tried to switch all my classes to study periods… but the stupid principle won't approve it. So switching is useless."

"You can't just… look. I know this sounds crazy, but I have a better plan."

Wheeling some huge, wrapped up box straight into Sydney's closest post office from Haffel's home. Raymond swerved this package through the front entrance to the surprise of the many onlookers. Once

pressed into the firm carpet. Raymond tightly dragged the contents right to the front counter.

“Hey mate… I’d like to send this package to the closest post office near Melbourne’s international Airport.”

Eyeballing the huge box up and down. He asked,

“What’s in the box?” The teller curiously prodded.

“It’s a… couch… I want to send it to…”

“Yeah, I’m a couch… you can sit on me and stuff.”

Presenting to the teller an awkward expression. The guy slowly stunted his finger towards the package in open dismay.

“Sir, that’s a person…”

Keeping up the act, the man eventually folded.

“Fuck it, whatever…”

Zooming through the air, Raymond watched the clouds eclipse into open smoke as the runway came into view. There, men in shiny hats and gear waved an open banner to ‘please don’t hit me, I have a wife and kids.’ Then, the wheels propelled downwards. Creating a rocking hull which shook the entire plain. Remembering he wasn’t in Final Destination 1. Raymond calmly collected his

luggage as he entered the gates of Melbourne's inner-city district. Lining up by the exit place, Raymond made his way over to a supervisor.

"Hey teacher…" Raymond asked. "I sent down here a package. I think it's in that post office right over there."

"Package?" The teacher replied. "A package of what?"

"Look, please can I go over there? Just to pick something up?"

Noticing the other teacher watching the little brats exiting off the plane. The teacher aid decided to go along with this. They turned around, giving off a scruffy look of whatever.

"I'll let the teacher know you're coming with me to that post office."

Entering the entry way into the post office. He approached the teller. Busy typing at some terminal. Upon arriving a few feet away from the teller, his eyes glared right up at both Raymond and the teacher aid.

"Hello there, how can I help you?"

"I have a package for Raymond I'd like to collect."

Going into the back of the establishment. The teller rolled out the red carpet for Raymond's suspiciously large package.

"Ok what the actual fuck…" the teacher aid blurted.

Raymond stuck his fingers along the lip of the tape. Trying to pull it off. Noticing her signature hiss, he pulled the hood right off to reveal a knocked up Haffel. Bouncing right out of the stylophone. She had been glad to have made it.

"How was the trip?" Raymond asked Haffel.

"I felt like I was being human trafficked." She replied, stretching her limbs. "Didn't have air for a few hours. But the chocolate kept me busy."

"She can stay in your dorm… just no funny business." The teacher aid folded his hands, pointing into Raymond's chest.

Driving all across the landscape of ant tunnels known as highway overpasses. First, the clouds didn't offer much of a view. Being overcast and all. Tall pillar like manmade structures dominated the fixtures of mankind's creation. Combining the occasional spring of flora. And fauna looting trash bins to survive. Taking a detour down some hefty highway. Raymond and Haffel acknowledged

the landscape artwork of excessive graffiti and colourful towers striking off in weird directions. Everything appeared grim. Coated in a thin layer of grey paint. From the distance, skyscrapers built up a wall of impenetrable magnitude. It was a city for sure. The sight they were used to back in Sydney. Just with less junkies taking shits on subway lines. Entering a lower road, they were lured towards a bridge. Where upon entering, they noticed to familiar figures holding hands upon a balcony skyline.

“Wait… Haffel they look like.”

Haffel went into cheering mode. Praying that they were gonna stay there. And just as fate would have it. The bus driver pulled up.

“Alright everyone!” The main teacher called. “We will do a head count then enter the motel. Today will be a free day but make sure not to leave the motel’s exit way.”

Storming down the bus. The pair joined hands as she counted.

“I promise… Bascone will be freed…” Raymond uttered silently.

“Let’s make it happen.” Haffel finished this chapter.

Chapter 31: Quick Catchup.

Unbuckling his bag to the soups of their floor. Raymond quickly whipped himself into shape. Haffel meanwhile, couldn't help but to faceplant her head straight into the pillow. Raymond, upon drawing out his swag. Turned and faced Haffel.

"Come on, what are you doing?" Raymond hurried his tone. "We have to go and save Bascone now."

"But look at this kitty pillow, it's so cute."

Eventually she strayed her hind legs up. Closely following Raymond as he calculated what floor they are on.

"You noticed them on the third floor, right? Or was it the fourth floor?"

Hitting the elevator, it made a slight ding sound before tracking open the elevator door.

Ding!

Once finished. Haffel and Raymond made pace. Entering the elevator as they debated what floor to check.

"I noticed at least 2 verandas below from them so I reckon they might be on the third floor."

"Ok… but this place looks massive. It scares me…"

Once the doors reopened. The pair made sure to cover as much ground as possible. No stone will be left unturned. Making their way down a corridor, Haffel couldn't tell if it was a new, unchecked one. Or 1 which had been observed for a while.

"Man… this place is endless…" Haffel wheezed.

"Come on Haffel… we have to keep trying…"

"What if they left…" Haffel straightly paused.

Moan!

Suddenly. What came into ear shot distance was the sound of someone being pinned to some wall within one of the rooms. Haffel's pupils shot down, as she aimed to cover her ears and rest her flappy ears. Along with it, the bed spring sounds didn't hide it. But as Raymond listened, it sounded familiar.

"Wait… that's Valerin."

"How on earth could you possibly tell it's Valerin?" Haffel requested to know.

"Did you honestly think all they did was sit in silence with a cup of coffee?"

Relaxing by the limelight of a lamp. Raymond HAD been trying to read some book on Shakespeare for an assessment. When suddenly.

“Ahh! Bascone! Fuck me harder!!!”

Turning the loungeroom into a heap of sex. Rolling his head in an agonising drained state. Raymond rotated to his door. Becoming ever more frustrated.

“Can you guys shut the fuck up I’m trying to read Shakespeare!”

Making his way to Valerin’s booked motel room. Raymond pounded his fist directly onto her door. Sounding like an FBI raid. Soon, the pounding stopped.

Errr!

“Hello there Raymond and Haffel… I didn’t expect room service.”

What was seen directly in front of them. Was Bascone fully open in the air. Stading there like Stonewall Jackson. Immediately, Raymond raised his hand to cover Haffel’s eyes.

“Eh… hey… Bascone?” Raymond asked. “Can you sheath your sword thanks?”

“What are you talking about?” Bascone remained confused. “It’s over there.”

Planted fully next to his bed was indeed his sword.

“And what’s with the knight’s helmet you’re wearing?”

“The helmet stays on during sex.”

From the corner of his eye. Raymond noticed the blanketed figure of Valerin. Remaining frozen in place. There, his eyes coated an ugly look of untrusting hate. Compared to her scared demeanour.

“Look I… I can explain everything just. Bascone, can you close the door?”

Quickly getting bare minimum on to keep this novel MA 15+. She shifted the door. Allowing them to enter.

“Raymond… Haffel I… I know I’ve taken him to Melbourne but. If I stayed any longer in Sydney. Who knows what would have happened. Agents threatened me to keep it a low profile…”

“Who do you work for?” Raymond requested to know.

“It’s Nercea Lionheart. He runs a technological company that somehow invented time travel. By luck, he had managed to bring Bascone into our time, but he didn’t end up teleporting where we wanted him.”

“Why should we trust you?” Haffel firmly held her ground. “You brought him over here. But what does he want?”

“He wants a scroll that apparently Bascone stole. I’ve tried my hardest to get him to give it to me, but he seemingly has no memory of taking any scrolls.”

Having some bone within her, Raymond ordered,

“Haffel. Keep watch over Bascone and Valerin.”

Suddenly, they couldn’t pick up on a random flash occurring on Valerin’s phone. Nor the team who had been secretly listening to them. Scanning everyone in the room. They knew who was connected to Bascone.

Brought into some open lobby room. Raymond alone saw what wonders were being suited up by the tech company. For a while now, some representee of the firm babbled on and on. About how advance their research and development branch was. Important details to fill the books for sure. But not something anyone except tech fetishists would find interesting. Then, a dark-presented figure appeared from behind Raymond.

“Hey kid come with me.”

It had been a security guard. Aiming to take him away from the group. He was confused. For the first part of

even being here, he hadn't done anything wrong. What made it worse was when the man spoofed up an argument.

"We caught you stealing. Come with me to the security office."

"Wh… what?" Raymond appeared disorientated. "Stealing? I would never…"

Grabbing him by the hand. Raymond was lured back into some room by the purple guy looking man. Once the door was silenced shut. Raymond relinquished his backpack.

"I'm telling you this is a misunderstanding. I have never stolen…"

Unpacking his bag. One by one the compartments were searched. Giving much needed time for 2 men in black suits, MIB style to come pouncing in.

"Great work. We'll notify Nercea Lionheart immediately."

Pulling a phone out, 1 of the agents texted Nercea whilst he was giving a presentation to the year 12's. Then suddenly, his phone beeped with a notification. drawing him to his phone.

"Hey assistant." He turned to her. "Continue the presentation to the year 12's."

“Yes Nercea Lionheart.” She replied. “I’ll take over.”

Clamping his boots on the ground. He waited. Hoping his prey wouldn’t flee.

Chapter 32: Book For The Sword

Placed within a chair. The agents tied Raymond against his will. Trying to shift away, he had many questions.

“What are you doing to me?” Raymond tried rattling away.

As the hat came flying off. 2 distinctly powerful knocks erupted behind the open oak. Raymond turned towards the door. Feeling the overbearing presence of someone, or something. Staring. Opening the door. Raymond saw the man. All cloaked in his thinly veiled king’s garments. Taking out his phone, the king quickly snapped a picture. Making sure to send it to Valerin.

“You are one unlucky boy… Raymond…”

“How do you know my name?” His fear snickered.

“I have eyes everywhere. And currently we’re searching for government bugs.”

Sat at the table, he began his interrogation. Dialling up Valerin’s number. She shortly answered the call of her master.

“Valerin… dear… I have your friend Raymond.”

He could hear an audible gasp emerge from Valerin’s speaker. While she had been enjoying the beautiful Southern Australian beach. That sentence rocked her sundae.

“You… you have him!?” Valerin cried. “Nercea leave him out of this!”

“All I want is the man you love Valerin.” Nercea proclaimed. “I have agents on their way now unless you bring him in.”

“I… I don’t want him gone! Don’t take him away from me!”

Nercea curled a smile.

“If it makes it easier, during my interrogation of Bascone I’ll let you do it… in my lair…”

Gulping down the last parts of ice cream. Valerin turned to Haffel, keeping an eye out on the pair. Like some kid with a big stick.

“Haffel!” Valerin called to. “They have Raymond!”

Jumping out of her skin. Haffel couldn’t believe it. In a quick panic, she didn’t know what to do. Valerin showed her the picture of Raymond taped up. She soon knew, she had to act.

“Is Haffel with you?” Nercea waited for a reply.

“Yes, she is.” Valerin mentioned.

“Look Valerin, bring her along. She can assist with getting Bascone to jog his memory.” Nercea filled in the gaps. “I’m so close to making my grandfather’s wish

come true. This is the moment that I have been working towards for my entire life. Don't fuck it up!"

Haffel and Valerin dragged along Bascone in metaphorical chains. Fearing Raymond's condition may become worse. There, they entered what was the dark building. Where all hopes die. And technology is born. Waiting for what seemed like hours. Eventually an echoing buzz erupted from the door. Looming his head up high, Nercea unlocked it. Making sure not to show Raymond to the outside. There she was. Valerin. Leading Bascone into the concrete jungle. Raymond's gaze fixated upon Valerin, not able to tell which side she was on. Beside her though was Haffel. Not trying to resist. But instead Haffel's face resembled that of her banging her toe against a corner.

"At last long reach…" Nercea suffocated the room. "Valerin. It took you a while, and it took me a while too…"

Leering his stunted footsteps slowly across the wooden floor. Both his hands rested behind his back. As he observed Bascone in the flesh.

"Is this your king you spoke of?" Bascone asked of Valerin.

“Glad to see you in the flesh… anyhow, take him upstairs.”

Bascone walked alongside Nercea’s sighing expression. Raymond was set free, alongside Haffel. Keeping close to the trio, now joined by Valerin. Both Haffel and Raymond strayed against the lining of some wall. Taking a sharp corner. They then watched the 3 enter the confines of a staff elevator. Never to be seen again.

Present day 9th floor

Sitting down, hitting the buckle of his armour set. Both Valerin and Nercea took up comfy seats whilst Bascone only had a metal stool. The room was pitch black. Cloaking the identities of the guards. Only allowing for the faces of Valerin and Nercea to remain visible.

“Tell me now Bascone… where are the scrolls?” Valerin asked in a polite voice. “Was it just 1 or many more?”

“I’m sorry but I have no idea what you’re talking about?”

“That day you were brought here, you were alleged to have brought a scroll, correct? Did you steal it?”

Bascone remained stunted in his chair. Wanting to know when interrogation was over.

“I never picked up any scroll.”

“Yes, you fucking did you stupid little French.” Nercea leaned over, uttering in his ear. “We have records. Does this look familiar to you?”

Placed directly in front of him, was some depiction of him in his hay-day. An archived image, of what modern day scholars would perceive to be him.

“You think that’s an image of me?” Bascone quickly deprecated. “Looks like some idiot…”

“You are an idiot!” Nercea shouted at him. “It was 1412 when…”

Ohhhh….

Rocking his head. After 2 entire years of Valerin spying on him. And Nercea’s lit up face.

“Yes Bascone… ye…”

“I used them as toilet paper when I arrived…”

Valerin’s face went completely pale. The once drifting in happiness land Nercea, quickly crumbled into shame and frustration. Suddenly,

Slam!

“I HAVE WASTED YEARS JUST FOR YOU TO TELL ME YOU USED THOSE SCROLLS AS TOILET PAPER!!!???”

“Well to me it was great fun stealing it. My Romanian friend would have enjoyed…”

“You imbecile!” Nercea shouted directly at him, coating Bascone’s armour in a layer of slime. “I was going to forge a great gift for my grandfather to make into an amulet! And this is how you repay me!? Do you realise what you have done!?”

His powerful, lion-like gaze then fixes on the shivering guards. Leaving the room in complete darkness, Nercea quickly slammed the door with a powerful,

THUD!

The guards followed suit. Trapping Valerin to worry alongside Bascone on future consequences. So, the pair waited. Valerin stood up, quickly hugging Bascone and crying like a grieving mother.

“I’m… so sorry…”

“Really has a fine taste for screaming, doesn’t he?”

Waiting in silence, she could hear Nercea screaming his head off. Using nothing but emotion to cement his reputation. Valerin could sense at least 2 researchers

surrounding Nercea. Trying to calm and explain the situation.

“Why did HE have to be such a foolish knight!?” Nercea shouted.

“Ok just… calm down…”

“Bring me a new one!” Nercea ordered. “The machine can work twice I know it can!”

“B… but sir… if we did that, it would ~*kill* Bascone. Replacing him with another. Completely wiping his memory. It would be a goose chase all over again…”

Valerin’s shallow confine wiggled off. Shaking her hands. She couldn’t believe those words. Staring at the door. Several tears strode across her face. Landing her pale eyes upon Bascone. He, like always, had no idea what the researcher meant. Remaining as oblivious as a duck being hunted with a silencer.

“K… kill?” Valerin repeated in her head. “Kill… kill. KILL!?”

Mopped through the mud, the researcher’s sentence continued to repeat over and over. Soon, she didn’t notice her back slowly slanting to one side. Then, her memories with Bascone. Connection, love, it would fade away. Replace him with a blank slate. All of this would be for nothing. Curling her hand over Bascone’s metallic

armoured fist, she soon clamped it shut. Bascone raised his eyes. Meeting directly with hers.

“Bascone… I have a plan…”

Haffel and Raymond hitched an unwarranted ride. Praying Valerin was actually on their side. Raymond held Haffel’s shaking hands. He could feel Haffel’s sweat drawn fingertips gash against his. Under that sweater. Soon enough, Raymond drew his lengthy arms closer to Haffel’s back.

“I… I’m worried about Bascone.” Haffel gently exhaled.

“We all are…” Raymond locked eyes with Haffel.

“Won’t we get in trouble though?” Haffel reminded Raymond about the situation. “I care about Bascone but…”

“Bascone is on the line… think only of him.”

She became rather silent. With a slight nod. The pair waited in silence.

“We picked the right elevator, correct?”

“I’m sure we did Haffel.”

Ding! Pop!

Shifting the gates to Nercea's castle. Haffel and Raymond made great haste searching the floor. Running together. It didn't take long. There from far away, Valerin and Bascone held hands. Figuring it wasn't the best time to spring out, considering the security presence. Valerin locked eyes once more with her master. However, she then noticed Haffel and Raymond's distinct shadow piercing the open office floor. Keeping tabs, she waited out Nercea's insane ramblings.

"So… have you decided to finally side with me?" Nercea remarked pleasantly, all be it passive-aggressive. "We can start over. Remember who's money you're on Valerin… me…"

From down the hall, emerging figures all coated in white made a quick dash over towards the standoff. As their presence quickly became known, Valerin turned Nercea's attention.

"Hey… what are those kids doing over there?" She pointed.

Angered by Haffel and Raymond shadowing their private conversation. He flickered for his security to hurriedly chase them down. Seeing them diverge upon them. Raymond grabbed Haffel's back, pulling them backwards before making a fleeing exit.

"Now then… where were we…"

Punch!

Leaning back, Valerin turned towards the researcher in high vis, holding a key. Plummeting into her jaw. She swung a fist and took her out immediately. Yanking the keys, Valerin's legs made quick motion down the hallway right as Bascone followed. Nercea screamed,

"Hey get back here!"

Beating within her heart. Her desired place made everything so clear. For as long as the time machine was still activated. They would hunt Bascone to the ends of the earth. She closed her eyes, blocking out the sun. As she leered a precious scream,

"I'M FREE AND I WILL NOT LET YOU TAKE AWAY THE MAN I LOVE!!!"

Following behind them were many layers of security. Gaining trail. Soon though, Haffel and Raymond splinted from a hallway. Joining Valerin.

Chapter 33: Goodbye Bascone

“Follow me!” Valerin shouted towards Haffel and Raymond. “I know where the time machine is!”

“What are you going to do with Bascone!?” Raymond uttered tremendously.

“I’m going to set him free!”

Opening some security stairs complex. They made their way down the flight of stairs while security continued pounding deep footsteps. Making their way to the heap of the stairs. Valerin quickly walked Bascone down in the most intense stair chasing sequence in fiction. Raymond took to the tail. Stopping at a corner, he swung his leg into an oncoming security guard. Striking his knee. Hurling a painful yelp, Raymond kept the dash as fast as possible towards Valerin.

“I’ll hold them off if I can!” Raymond sword oath.

Down to the final floor. Valerin smashed open the door, surprising many of the researcher staffers. Who were too busy playing D&D. Rushing over to a bookshelf, Raymond’s twisting hand rotated a plummeting shift in the shelf’s trajectory. Landing it face-first towards the door. Barricading the entry, security continued pounding the door.

“Haffel!” Raymond shouted towards. “Help me!”

In his final moments of being on this earth together. Bascone and Valerin gripped hands. Cautiously sharing together, the last day they'll ever see one another. Bascone dropped all to focus upon her. Graciously spreading his thumb across her cheek. Planting upon her a fine crease.

"Is this goodbye?" Bascone asked.

"Yes… yes, it is… it's too dangerous for you to be here… we can send you back."

"Back to my old life? Me wife? Me bloody English?"

"Yes… all of it. I will always remember you, for all of your laughs. Your humble moments of love. And sweetest of all… that beach walk… where our hands first connected… and where my eyes began to open. I know I'm not sick anymore. It's love Bascone."

Flickers of the beach came to mind. Feeling her feet slightly sink within its smooth, silky surface. Slowly removing his helmet. Bascone revealed his slightly clean hair that had now outgrown French regulations. Not that they had much in the first place. Feeling the sweetest of all gifts. Bascone stood aside.

"Now… I must give you the greatest gift I can give you."

There, he handed over a most prideful possession. His iconic helmet. Planted softly between her tiny hands. Bascone made one final kiss.

“Find my grave… I will stay in Orleans for as long as I can. This is goodbye.”

All sense of time dissipated as she watched the elegant march of Bascone. She followed, opening the door for him. On the plateau, Bascone waved away his feelings towards Valerin. Raymond and Haffel kept the door chambered tightly. Even as Nercea’s forces bulked up the door’s frame. Sending the screws out from the hinges one at a time. Knocking down a payload, they soon merged upwards with a battering ram. Shifting the door with several padded presses.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Inserting the key. The log she inputted into the machine mentioned the exact time he had left France for Sydney. Being the first person to have done so. Then, the time came. Pressing the backwards in time panel, swapping it from forward. Valerin farewelled their adventure with them. And Bascone slowly transported himself away. He left with the image of a heart from his fingers. Back to a time he should have stayed in. Died in, lived in. Orleans, 1412. Within the blink of an eye. He was gone. The only thing left was his helmet he gifted her. As expected, the machine running on the power equivalent of several

countries exceeded its use. Blowing several fuses. It popped and smoked all the hardware joining together to create one device. Soon enough, security managed to make their way into the situation. Seemingly to have needed a powder keg of black powder to blow the door open. What followed were Nercea's curses. However, she blocked them away, because now. Her heart was set *~free…*

"Thank you… Bascone…"

Graduation

On a private deck, Raymond and Haffel held hands. Having been a few months since Bascone departed from this earth. Raymond leaned closer to Haffel. Gaping their mouths, Haffel made an extended effort to make out with Raymond. Holding each other tight, Haffel reached her hands over his back. Having found her happy ever after. Raymond reached back. Feeling amazed however quite suspicious.

“Wow Haffel… you’ve gotten very good at kissing. What’s your trick?”

“Oh ah… women’s secret…”

Bouncing into clear view was that of a green tree frog covered in makeup marks, appearing exactly the same colour as Haffel’s gothic lipstick. Immediately, Raymond gashed open his mouth. Scraping his tongue in disgust. As Haffel awkwardly smiled. Once the dust settled, Haffel asked with a leering in hand,

“Care to dance?”

“Sure…”

Raymond held hands as he took her to the dancing stage. There, the lights flickered down. As they smoothed out a fine dance. It was then that Ryan’s words repeated inside his head.

“If it had been your mother? Raymond?”

Holding Haffel tight, he watched her gleeful face stare back at him. Embracing her hand, he said out loud in a quiet voice,

“I understand more about feelings than you do, Ryan…”

Alone, Valerin sat down beside a furry cat she had named after her love, Bascone. There, she pondered on her computer, finding different grave sites. Determined to find her long lost love. Moving her mouse around many graves however, she found one. Reading,

“To my dear love Valerin of southern land. May my precious, my beloved friend and that witch. Find this here piece, and upon forth, that that has been given. Ps, thanks for sex.”

She knew exactly who it was. Her eyes lit up in upmost joy.

Passing by a month. Valerin, Raymond and Haffel enter the grounds of where Valerin believed Bascone had been buried. Sure enough the trail thinned out as she entered the 1400’s section of the massive burial. Facing what seemed to have been some scuffled grave. Valerin had been saddened to have set him free. Yet so blessed to have met him not too long ago. She frantically smiled in

a display of both honour and grief. Wishing he was still with her to this day. Haffel held Raymond. Being the one to have cried the loudest. Meeting once more. The memories flowed. However, Sir Bascone is marching on. And they will feel both pride and sorrow once he has marched on. Forever, he will be known as Sir Bascone of Orleans. Knighted by the King of France. But to them, Valerin, Haffel and Raymond. He was, Sir Bascone of Sydney. Rotating around his helmet that she had brought. Haffel and Raymond took one more glance, before she crowned the headstone. Rocking its hilt, she made sure it remained tucked in. Smiling as its shining glass frame propelled rays of light onto her face. She would never see him again. Soon enough, the afternoon sun began to be rudely interrupted by the moon. Raymond, Haffel and Valerin prepared to leave him behind. Approaching a confused Frenchmen, who watched the whole thing unfold, he said,

“Oui oui! You know that man has been dead for about almost 500 years, correct?”

Valerin turned and smiled.

“Yet it felt like yesterday…”

Walking away, a ghostly figure of Bascone waved back. Happy to have known she truly cared to visit. Although he is dead, he will forever be alive within her heart.

Thanks for reading!

Sir Bacone is marching on!

So too does life!